"It is so Open-ended": Teachers' Views, Perceptions and Experiences of Leadership and Leader Identity in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

This thesis describes and explores New Zealand early childhood teachers' views, perceptions and experiences of educational leadership and their leader identity. In particular, this study sought teachers' views around the types of leadership practice they have experienced, their perceptions of themselves as leaders and also what knowledge and experience support them to negotiate and develop their own leader identity. Qualitative data were collected from six teacher participants from two early childhood services who were involved in one focus group and one individual interview, and also from analysis of centre documentation. The data from these three sources were analysed using an interpretive, inductive and thematic approach. Key findings identified included viewing leadership knowledge and understanding as a complex notion as it was influenced by teachers' past and present experiences, seen as ever-evolving and socially constructed with people and places. Another finding revealed that the teachers had positive perceptions of themselves as teacher leaders, and with positive support and encouragement, enjoyed leading in various areas. Both settings included leaders who practised effective leadership by promoting and encouraging teachers to experience a range of roles and responsibilities and inviting teachers to lead in areas based on their strengths, interests and passions. Finally, the teachers embraced learning on-the-job as a preferred way of developing their own leader identity and leadership knowledge, skills, and practice. My study argues that teachers' construction of a leader identity and their enactment of leadership practice is dependent on the environment and the people around them, in particular formal leaders. Implications for teachers and leaders in early childhood education include understanding leadership as a diverse and unique practice, valuing learning on-the-job rather than relying only on set and prescribed leadership frameworks, and acknowledging the role that supportive positional leaders play in establishing an environment conducive to teacher leadership practice and teachers constructing a positive leader identity.

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Chapter One
INTRODUCTION

Leadership is a concept and practice experienced and enacted by teachers and leaders in early childhood education (ECE) as part of their everyday roles and responsibilities. In general terms, educational leadership in ECE can be described as collaborative relationships that mobilise individuals' skills, knowledge, and experiences to progress shared educational goals (Cooper, 2018). Leadership in ECE is important to understand because it influences relationships with all those involved, and a setting's operation and functioning. It also impacts the provision of quality teaching and learning experienced by children and their families.

Research on leadership in ECE is developing and evolving. The majority of existing knowledge and understandings derives from research on the schooling sector with much less about ECE. This research gap and the unique and diverse nature of ECE settings require much-needed research on leadership and leader identity to inform early childhood teachers' and leaders' understandings. The paucity of research in ECE also means there is a lack of a clear definition of leadership, which creates complexities around understanding leadership as a concept and a practice. In addition to leadership as a practice, approach, and way of being, the concept of leader identity highlights the way people see themselves as a leader, highlighting the practice rather than the title. This study will refer to both formal and informal leaders. A formal leader has a designated positional role/title, whereas an informal leader does not but takes on leadership roles and duties as part of their everyday practice (Douglass, 2018). Teachers' leadership practice and leader identity, the phenomenon of my study, is viewed as being constructed in a many ways due to the uniqueness of individuals' views, perceptions and experiences of leadership practice. In this research, I aim to respond to the identified research gap by exploring teachers' views, perceptions and experiences of leadership and their leader identity. I will be using a qualitative, interpretive methodology to describe and explore how six early childhood teachers view and perceive educational leadership from their personal and professional experiences.

Research Context

ECE in New Zealand (NZ) is a non-compulsory education sector that provides a range of diverse and unique services to families and children from aged birth to school age (typically five years old). The range of ECE services includes education and care centres (ECC), public kindergartens, kōhanga reo (total immersion in Māori language, culture and values as a family-led service), home-based services and Playcentres (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2019). ECC currently comprise 57% of licensed services, followed by public kindergartens with 14% of licensed services (MOE, 2019). As two

common teacher-led service providers in NZ, ECC and public kindergartens were chosen as the ECE settings for this study. Selecting two service providers meant acknowledging two types of leadership structures. The first setting is one of 107 kindergartens, part of a larger organisation and the second setting is one of four privately owned childcare centres, part of a small organisation. Both settings are required to adhere to the minimum qualification level stipulated in the Education (Early Childhood Centres) Regulations (MOE, 2008) which is that 50% of staff in teacher-led services will hold a relevant ECE teaching qualification. Both settings in this study went beyond this minimum expectation.

Educational Leadership in NZ

Several initiatives and frameworks in NZ have been developed to support and enhance teachers' understandings and enactment of leadership. They address, recognise, and promote the importance of developing teachers' leadership capabilities across teaching professions in NZ, including ECE. To address a gap in leadership support at a national level, the Education Council (EC) (now known as the Teaching Council of Aotearoa NZ) commissioned the development of *The Leadership Strategy for the Teaching Profession of Aotearoa* (2018a). To support this framework, the EC developed the *Educational Leadership Capability Framework* (2018b) document. This capability framework provides explanations of specific capabilities with examples of how these could be enacted in practice. These initiatives and frameworks were created in a response to provide more equitable educational outcomes for children through the development of teacher leadership capabilities for teachers in positional and non-positional roles across all education settings.

The vision of the Teaching Council's leadership strategy outlines "through principled and inspirational leadership, a culturally capable, competent and connected teaching profession achieves educational equity and excellence for all children and young people in Aotearoa New Zealand" (EC, 2018a, p. 4). Another EC document pertinent to the teaching profession of NZ is, *Our Code, Our Standards* (EC, 2017); the code and standards apply to every certificated teacher in NZ, in any role or teaching environment.

Although these initiatives apply to the whole teaching profession, including ECE, clarity is needed about what kind of support and professional learning is required to implement strategies and support teacher leadership while considering the uniqueness of each context and people's diverse experiences and understandings. More than 10 years ago, Thornton et al. (2009) described the MOE's lack of emphasis on leadership in the early childhood sector and a lack of leadership development programmes in ECE. Since then, the Teaching Council of Aotearoa NZ and scholars (Rodd, 2013; Thornton, 2019; Thornton et al., 2009) have emphasised the importance of developing teacher leadership in the ECE sector as an urgent issue because it supports quality learning outcomes for children and their ECE

communities (EC, 2018a).

Sociocultural Theory

Although not heavily emphasised in this thesis, a sociocultural theoretical perspective (Vygotsky, 1978) will be referred to in places to support this research on teacher leadership. From a sociocultural perspective, knowledge and experiences are socially constructed by people as they interact and communicate with one another. These social exchanges support the development of cognition and the process of meaning-making (Vygotsky, 1978). In my study, learning to lead and seeing oneself as a leader are social and relational activities (Cooper, 2018; Vygotsky, 1978). Sociocultural theory also underpins *Te Whariki* (MOE, 2017), the national curriculum for ECE in NZ, which guides both teachers' and leaders' practices in NZ. While it is not a leadership document per se, the concept of leadership is mentioned under each strand as consideration for teachers, leaders and organisations. This inclusion positions leadership as a collaborative and contributive action that all teachers and formal leaders in ECE are expected to promote in practice.

Rationale for My Study

My study stems from my own personal and professional experiences spanning over 20 years as a teacher and a leader in a variety of settings in ECE. My recent participation in a postgraduate paper on ECE leadership provoked a strong connection with the notion of ECE leadership as a complex, diverse, challenging and elusive construct. My philosophy as an ECE teacher and mentor has been to see potential in everyone, respecting and embracing the uniqueness of teaching collectively. One of the main purposes of this study is to respond to my long-time interest in the idea of leadership as a social construct and what it looks like in practice when people and contexts are directly involved. As a teacher-leader myself, I often wondered how other teachers view leadership and what leadership practices and experiences influence and motivate them to take on leadership roles and responsibilities. In response to my interest and curiosity in leadership, I have written about my metaphor of leadership as a bus journey (Gorst, 2020). The following is an excerpt from this article:

> *Learning about leadership has led to a significant shift for me in that I have come to understand and appreciate the complex and unique nature of leadership in early childhood education, and the ongoing challenges that continue to come our way.* (p. 23)

Hence, I wish to discover other teachers' views on leadership and their leader identity or perceptions of self as a leader, most notably, what knowledge and experiences have helped them develop a sense of themselves as a leader. Also, as the NZ situation indicates, it is crucial that research in this area continues to develop.

Thesis Overview

There are six chapters included in this thesis. This first introductory chapter has outlined the research gap my study responds to, provided an overview of the research context and the rationale. Chapter two reviews literature related to educational leadership, teacher leadership and leader identity. Chapter three outlines the methodology, the methods used, and the ethical considerations. Chapter four presents key findings of the study. Chapter five discusses the key findings in relation to relevant literature. Lastly, chapter six presents a conclusion of my study's overall significance, highlighting the key findings, implications for leadership practice and teacher leader identity, considerations for policy, limitations, and recommendations for further research.

Chapter Two
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

My research aims to explore ECE teachers' views and perceptions of educational leadership and their leader identity. The chapter begins with reviewing relevant literature to highlight some of the complexities and constraints of educational leadership, followed by teacher leadership literature ideas. This review also highlights teacher leadership development ideas, the importance of leader identity, and the value of supportive relationships for teacher leaders consistent with sociocultural theory. The chapter concludes by introducing the research questions, validated by my review, which will guide this study. During the literature review, it became clear that research on educational leadership in ECE is an area that continues to be explored and developed in ECE. Also, the significance of teachers' leader identity has recently surfaced as a newly developing and evolving idea. The literature that was available mostly derives from research in school contexts, many ideas of which are relevant to ECE and, therefore, applied to this study.

Educational Leadership: Complexities and Constraints

There are complexities and constraints of educational leadership. These include leadership lacking a clear definition and having a low profile, the misconceptions around formal and informal leadership, leadership knowledge and practice developing and evolving over time, and considerations of leadership as a social and contextual construct.

Leadership Lacking a Clear Definition and Having a Low Profile

Educational leadership is one of two foci of my study, the other one being teacher leader identity. The idea of leadership has been around for decades. Thus, there are both expansive and complex understandings of leadership concepts and practices across the sectors (Cooper, 2014; Sinha & Hanuscin, 2017; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Most problematic is that this has resulted in leadership having a low-profile in ECE and a lack of acknowledgement and engagement from educationalists, scholars and teachers, and leaders. In ECE, understandings about the concept and practice of leadership and leader identity are beginning to grow and develop. However, a lack of clarity and understanding is still very much a prevalent and debatable issue (Cooper, 2014; Klevering & McNae, 2018; Rodd, 2013; Thornton, 2019; Thornton et al., 2009). In their report on the conceptualisation of leadership in ECE, Thornton et al. (2009) identified several issues and dilemmas facing leadership, such as a low profile and a common definition (see Chapter one, p. 2). Rodd (2006), an Australian ECE educationalist, suggested that the low profile and lack of acknowledgement of

leadership are recognised as an ongoing enigma for many teachers. Although formal leaders are expected to enact leadership practice, there are some individuals who enact informal leadership but do not engage with understandings of the concept and practice, which perpetuates confusion and mixed perceptions and creates complexity and uncertainty. ECE leadership scholars (Rodd, 2006, 2013; Thornton et al., 2009) have addressed tensions in this area with their insights; however, progressing discussion and considerations of these issues and further exploration of the unique contexts of ECE settings requires additional work. The paucity of literature on ECE teachers' orientation to leadership signals an urgent need for further research on teachers' and leaders' views and perceptions of leadership and teachers' leader identity or how they see themselves as leaders. This issue is made worse by not having a clear definition or common understanding of leadership and many teachers being left without support to identify and potentially develop their leadership practices. My study aims to explore what some of these complexities are from teachers' perspectives and how teachers view leadership based on their own experiences.

The low profile and general lack of understanding of leadership in ECE restrict teachers' knowledge of what effective leadership might look like. Rodd (2006) recommended the need for an active and strong identification and recognition of the leadership role and associated skills and knowledge required. Later, Rodd (2013) argued that all ECE teachers, including those without positional leadership roles, should become familiar with the theoretical underpinnings and current research findings regarding a leader's role. Rodd argued this because research that suggested teachers can lead in their everyday practice without a positional leadership role. Similarly, NZ ECE researcher Cooper (2014) explored the notion of 'everyday teacher leadership' to foreground the idea of teachers informally leading, which places an even stronger emphasis on teachers' need for leadership knowledge and experiences of effective leadership practice. Other researchers have suggested that teachers who informally lead can develop a willingness to embrace their leader selves (Cooper, 2018; Douglass, 2018).

Misconceptions around Formal and Informal Leadership

Compared to other educational sectors, ECE is in a unique position where teachers commonly work together in teams, often with and alongside the formal leader. Aside from ECE researchers' focus on distributed notions of leadership (Clarkin-Phillips et al., 2011; Douglass, 2018) and collective leadership through a sociocultural lens (Cooper, 2018), ECE has little research literature on leadership to refer to that reflects the unique nature of collaborative teaching. Traditional views of leadership focus on the position, title, and characteristics of a leader rather than the practice of leadership. An example of this in practice is in Grarock and Morrissey's (2013) study using qualitative, semi-structured interviews of Australian ECE teachers' perceptions of their ability to act as educational leaders. Their study revealed that when a hierarchical leadership model was dominant in the centres,

teacher leadership was only enacted within teachers' own rooms and was not transferred across the centres unless teachers themselves held a formal leadership title. Although the teachers practised pedagogical leadership in their own rooms, they didn't enact more collegial notions of leadership such as collective, distributed, or shared leadership across the centres where they could utilise their skills for a collective benefit. This situation highlights that traditional views of leadership focus on the leader's position, title and characteristics, rather than teachers' enactment of informal leadership across the centres.

Leadership in ECE is relational in that it is enacted as a collected, shared, and distributed practice amongst the teaching team (Douglass, 2018). Douglass acknowledged a significant point after interviewing 43 ECE teachers was how leadership is something people do rather than a job title, and even more importantly, it can be enacted by all teachers, whether in formal or informal leadership roles. Douglass (2018) argued that to embrace and enact collected, shared or distributed leadership practice, both teachers and leaders would need relevant knowledge and experience for this to occur. Formal leaders would also need to be aware of how they lead others. Brooker and Cumming's (2019) study on Australian ECE teachers about the 'dark side of leadership' similarly used qualitative focus groups (online) and semi-structured interviews. These researchers revealed there can be negative experiences and detrimental effects on teachers when leaders use their 'formal' titles to control others through fear and intimidation. These experiences influenced teachers' views of a 'formal' leader as controlling and manipulating. This negatively impacted teachers' job satisfaction and their leadership development creating a negative misconception of a formal leadership role.

In summary, this review of the literature on the misconceptions of formal and informal leadership suggests that for teachers to navigate informal leadership roles, they need positive experiences with others to construct their knowledge and understanding of leadership to develop positive self-perceptions of themselves as leaders. This situation affirms the value of relationships in that teachers may require guidance and support from more experienced teachers and formal leaders.

Leadership Knowledge and Practice Develops and Evolves Overtime

Understandings and experiences of educational leadership grow and evolve overtime; they are ever-changing in response to social and relational factors. This important and relevant validation was recognised by several scholars (e.g., Davis et al., 2015; Mettiainen, 2016; Rodd, 2013; Sims et al., 2018). This notion of evolvement can be influenced by the people and the settings that teachers experience. For example, teachers' and leaders' definitions and understandings about leadership evolve as they learn more about the needs of those who are associated with early childhood services (Rodd, 2013). Unpacking this idea further, Davis et al. (2015) viewed leaders operating much like a dance

between their roles and responsibilities. Like an ongoing dance, it can be changed and can stop and start and evolve as needed. Mettiainen's (2016) understandings of leadership assert a similar idea of becoming, like an ebb and flow with no start, no end, and always developing dependent on the context, people and time, including how people are becoming and changing all the time from past, present, and future experiences. Moreover, Sims et al. (2018) discussed leadership in ECE as being ever evolving but also how it is influenced by social and political contexts. Together these ideas highlight the significance of influential factors on leadership are both external and internal. Overall then, reviewing this literature shows that educational leadership can be socially influenced by people and contexts and that as these two factors evolve, so too do the ideas, views and understandings of leadership.

Contextual and Social Influences on Leadership

Through a sociocultural theoretical lens, teaching teams social contexts can be seen as influencing leadership practice in ECE (Rodd, 2013; Waniganayake et al., 2017). Rodd (2013) referred to leadership understandings as being underpinned by a socio-cultural theory to suggest that "the ideas and meanings" are constructed socially. Additionally, the relationships between teachers and leaders in ECE contexts involve highly relational processes, including regular interactions and discussions. Waniganayake et al. (2017) also indicated leadership as being socially and contextually constructed, and they acknowledged how environments and the people in them influence leadership enactment. These ideas suggest the formal leader is assumed to be responsible for establishing and nurturing an environment that embraces collaboration and inclusion of all those in an ECE setting. These ideas are supported by Klevering and McNae (2018), who also foreground relationships and connections. They assert that the complexities of leadership in ECE in NZ are influenced by the broad and varied educational landscapes of people and settings. Viewing leadership through a sociocultural theoretical lens also aligns with Douglass's (2018) reference to leadership within a team as a relational and collective practice.

In summary, the small sample of research literature located on ECE environments and leadership as a social and relational construct highlights a range of constraints on and complexities of leadership. It also suggests the value of a sociocultural theoretical lens for making sense of the concept and practice of leadership and the notion of leader identity from the perspectives of teachers.

Teacher Leadership

Teacher leadership has been explored from a range of perspectives. Relevant literature located was mainly based on school contexts, suggesting that teacher leadership remains under-researched in ECE. The literature reflects diverse understandings of the concept of teacher leadership (Sinha & Hanuscin, 2017; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Additionally, teachers' experiences of

leadership practice, whether based on having a leadership role or observations of and interactions with others' leadership practice, likely influences and impacts their understandings of teacher leadership (Sinha & Hanuscin, 2017).

Teacher Leadership in Practice

The concept of teacher leadership in schools does not have a clear or consistent definition. York-Barr and Duke (2004), in their review on teacher leadership literature in schools, acknowledged this lack of consensus on one definition and how teacher leadership is a unique form of leadership as it does not sit within a formal hierarchy or role. However, in some settings, teacher leadership does reflect a hierarchical position, so it seems possible that teacher leadership can be enacted informally without a formal hierarchy of a role or title and formally within a hierarchy. Teacher leadership assumes teacher agency within relationships, teaching and learning alongside efforts to improve students' educational experiences and outcomes. York-Barr and Duke (2004) referred to four conceptions of leadership that acknowledge both formal and informal leaders: participative leadership, leadership as an organisational quality, distributed leadership, and parallel leadership. They suggested that teacher leadership emerges when these conceptions of leadership are evident in teachers' contexts and practice. Further to this, understandings and perceptions of teacher leadership are constructed through teachers' beliefs and values and, more importantly, through the leadership practices they are familiar with and experience (Rodd, 2013). It is possible that some of these leadership practices may be ineffective and perhaps even undesirable, as noted by Thornton et al. (2009), where beginning teachers may inherit unwanted leadership roles too soon and feel unprepared to enact leadership practices.

These ideas suggest that conceptions and practices of teacher leadership would need to be understood and modeled for teachers to experience and see themselves as informal teacher leaders who can make a positive difference to children's learning outcomes. These experiences may require guidance from formal leaders to create opportunities and support teachers to enact leadership amongst a team of teacher leaders. Research on how this can occur in practice would be paramount for ECE teachers and leaders to develop and enhance their knowledge and practice of informal teacher leadership.

Teacher Leadership in ECE

Teacher leadership is an important focus in ECE. As mentioned in Chapter One (p. 2), addressing the development of teacher leadership in ECE in NZ has been identified by the Teaching Council and scholars as an important issue (Rodd, 2013; Thornton, 2019; Thornton et al., 2009). However, this significant issue is also influenced by an ongoing dilemma of supporting the development of teacher leadership in ECE. Cooper's (2018) ideas of teacher leadership emphasise the influence it has on others: teachers, children and their families, and how this relational influence can occur as part of

teachers' everyday practices. Similarly, Thornton et al. (2009) identified that leadership is a priority for the sector as a whole and advocated for distributed models of leadership and fostering teacher leadership as a way of encouraging teachers to work together and maintain their dedication, enthusiasm and commitment to quality practices.

Distributed leadership provides a context for the enactment of teacher leadership. Teaching and curriculum activities are shared amongst the team in a way that promotes and encourages teachers to lead from their individual strengths and passions. Rodd (2013) described distributed leadership as a collective responsibility where teachers voluntarily choose to step up where and when needed. However, this approach does not guarantee that any teacher will 'step up.' For teachers to emerge as leaders from within a team, they need support and encouragement from formal leaders who are willing to provide opportunities for teachers to experience leadership in their practice. Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003), Australian ECE researchers, raised the value of having many leaders in a team with specified domains of expertise and experience. They argued that this supports pedagogical leadership to be distributed in this way, but also in a way that considers teachers' strengths and interests. A leader's role in distributed leadership is, therefore, to value and embrace everyone's contributions by getting to know individuals' strengths, interests and passions and encourage individuals to draw on their expertise to lead (Cooper, 2018; Thornton et al., 2009). A distributive approach of leadership is important then, as it influences the quality of education and care provision because its key focus is to improve teaching and learning within ECE environments. Given positive outcomes for children and their families are the main aim of teaching and learning in ECE, distributed leadership promotes growth and strengthens learning for teachers and children and families. However, these ideas raise the issue of whether formal leaders can let go of some of their pedagogical leadership roles and responsibilities and invite and encourage others to take the lead to support a context of distributed leadership.

Another leadership approach involving teachers is pedagogical leadership. Bøe and Hognestad's (2017) study on Norwegian pedagogical leaders, introduced the idea that core pedagogical leadership responsibilities can be enacted through a lens of distributed leadership. In Finland, Heikka et al. (2019) revealed how sufficient implementation of distributed pedagogical leadership (DPL) relies on teachers' commitment to pedagogical leadership. For this to happen, formal leaders would need to have knowledge and experience to effectively implement DPL in practice. Carroll-Lind et al.'s (2016) study of NZ ECE teachers' pedagogical leadership knowledge emphasised pedagogical leadership as leadership for learning for children, still they acknowledged the learning that takes place in teaching teams is equally important. Leadership, in their view was not a solo performance. It involves a formal leader who delegates work from the top down, amongst all staff, but in a collaborative and

interdependent way, which means teachers will have opportunities to have positive experiences that strengthen their commitment to enacting pedagogical leadership. Bøe and Hognestad (2017) acknowledged the complexities of leadership within a DPL approach. Although they recognised the value of collaboration between formal and informal leaders, they also outlined the limitations of DPL, particularly when investigating formal teacher leaders' practice in relation to the range of 'other' tasks such as, leading knowledge development and directing and facilitation staff resources to promote DPL. They suggested a hybrid leadership practice for formal teacher leaders as an alternative that can embrace mixed leadership styles required to lead effectively in ECE.

Teacher Leadership Development

There are several initiatives that have attempted to support the development of teacher leadership in education. The literature falls within several research areas: preparing teacher leaders, teacher leadership development and leadership frameworks and guidelines.

Preparing Teacher Leaders

Preparing teacher leaders can be viewed as a way to equip teachers with knowledge and skills to support them in navigating to be a teacher leader in practice. The literature on preparing teacher leaders is scant, and what exists was mainly carried out in schools. In their extensive review of teacher leadership research in school settings, Wenner and Campbell (2017) found little literature on preparing teacher leaders. What they were able to locate, focused on two main sources of learning, either professional development, conferences and local training or Master's programmes. This finding indicates three conclusions, firstly that leadership learning is mostly done out of context, and secondly, that generic leadership knowledge can be applied to all settings despite each context being unique with regard to the setting and people, and thirdly, that there is not a lot of leadership learning in pre-service teacher education.

These conclusions do not align with the reality of ECE leadership practices and concepts. Each setting in ECE has its own ways of operating and teaching, reflective of the environment, leadership structures and approaches and the children, their families and the community. This idea of teachers' unique leadership experiences was apparent in American-based researchers Sinha and Hanuscin's (2017) qualitative multiple case study. The authors reveal how school teachers can emerge as teacher leaders which resulted in a model of teacher leadership development (from teacher, to teacher leader) that included three synergistic components: leadership views, practices and identities. A vital aspect they acknowledged was that individual teachers pursued different pathways within the model dependent on their experiences, priorities and contexts. These considerations for diversity align with sociocultural theory and the idea that ECE teachers' knowledge, views, practice and enactment of leadership are

influenced by social and contextual factors. It seems important then for my study to acknowledge Sinha and Hanuscin's (2017) inclusion and recognition of identity construction as a component of teacher leader development. Similarly, Carver's (2016) study based on leadership development of school teachers indicates leader identity formation as an important factor of teacher leadership development in schools.

In summary, most of the literature on teacher leadership development was based on school contexts, highlighting research gaps on teacher leadership and leader identity in ECE, suggesting an important foci for the current research. York-Barr and Duke (2004) noted a lack of literature on the process of teacher leadership development and acknowledged how teacher leadership development is a complex phenomenon. Carver's (2016) study highlighted the importance of identity transformation as a critical step in the preparation of leaders. Carver discussed that as the practice of teacher leadership grows in schools, so too must the understandings of how to prepare teachers for these critical leadership roles and responsibilities. Wenner and Campbell (2017) acknowledged an increased interest in teacher leadership as a key component of school reform. For example, the inclusion of teacher leadership in teacher evaluations and the challenge of teacher attrition highlighted a need for more literature based on empirical research with robust data collection methods. Wenner and Campbell raised one important question as an area for further research was 'How is teacher leadership enacted?' Carver (2016) also concluded that there is little research on preparation programming and its impact and leader identity formation as an important component of teacher leadership development. Together, these ideas suggest the need for further research to explore how teachers, specifically in ECE given the research gaps, enact leadership and how their leader identities develop.

Frameworks and Initiatives for Leadership

Over time, the NZ Education Council (EC) and scholars have identified the development of teacher leadership across education sectors in NZ as a crucial issue to address. One main reason for encouraging this focus is based on research that has revealed how effective leadership influences quality learning outcomes for children and positive experiences for teachers and leaders.

In response to the need for development in the area of educational leadership, the Teaching Council of Aotearoa NZ, the EC has released some initiatives and frameworks (see Chapter one, p. 2). *The Leadership Strategy for the teaching profession of Aotearoa New Zealand* (2018a) was written to enable every teacher in NZ, regardless of their role or setting to develop their own leadership capability through opportunities and experiences. The document acknowledges the effect that inspirational leadership can have on teachers who are viewed as culturally capable, competent and connected. These skills are seen to support leadership for educational equity and excellence for all children in NZ. A

related document, the *Educational Leadership Capability Framework* (EC, 2018b), describes a range of core educational leadership capabilities in practice to promote quality learning outcomes for children and, emphasises that the development of leadership capabilities is intended for all teachers with formal or informal leadership roles. One of the capabilities in the *Educational Leadership Capability Framework* is "building and sustaining collective leadership and professional community" (EC, 2018, p. 9). This capability refers to leadership that includes organisations, teams, expert teachers, and curriculum or initiatives. It would seem that for teachers to develop this capability, they would require ongoing support from experienced formal leaders who embrace and promote collective leadership in their settings. However, such support for the ECE sector has not been forthcoming, revealing the need to explore what support teachers have had to rely on to develop their understandings and practices of leadership.

This strategy and its framework are guidelines that may also need to acknowledge the differing leadership approaches of individuals, particularly in ECE where unique environments are socially constructed by teachers and leaders working collaboratively. One focus in the *Educational Leadership Capability Framework* is "building and sustaining collective leadership and professional community within organisations, teams, expert teachers, and leadership of curriculum or initiative" (EC, 2018, p. 9). While the strategy covers a range of education settings in NZ, further research is needed to discover what kind of support and professional learning will help address issues regarding the development of teacher leadership in ECE. The Teaching Council's *Our Code, Our Standards* (EC, 2017) outlines the expectations of conduct and integrity of teachers in NZ. One of the core values to promote high-quality teaching practice is Whakamana (Māori: to empower), which relates to providing high-quality teaching and leadership that empowers all learners to reach their highest potential, revealing another reason to pay attention to leadership in the unique context of ECE.

The minimal attention paid to leadership in ECE is a long-standing issue. As previously mentioned, Thornton et al. (2009) identified several issues and dilemmas, including the low profile of leadership, a lack of a definition or common understanding of leadership, and confusion between the concepts of leading and managing. Thornton et al. also acknowledged the dilemma of newly qualified and less experienced teachers taking on leadership positions, a lack of emphasis on leadership in the early childhood sector by the MOE, and a lack of leadership development programmes in ECE. A decade later, Thornton (2019) continues to argue similar points and offers valuable reflections on leadership in ECE over the last 10 years. Thornton concluded that although there have been shifts in some areas of leadership, there is still a need for more growth and development, particularly in building and developing strong networks, professional communities, and engaging in mentoring and coaching. These long-standing issues highlight that leadership as a concept and practice continue to be a pertinent

area to focus on in research and in practice. However, it seems the MOE initiatives and frameworks for leadership have missed the significant link between quality and leadership.

In summary, this section has identified a strong consensus in the literature of leadership as a practice and a role. A range of practices and concepts have been discussed under two areas: the complexities and constraints of educational leadership; and teacher leadership. Leadership in ECE is complex and unique. It is not always prescribed, and there is no one set way to enact it. These ideas suggest that ECE teachers need to have opportunities to experience and gain knowledge and an understanding of a range of effective leadership approaches and practices. Teachers first and foremost need to have an understanding of the concept of teacher leadership so they can grapple and negotiate the place they stand within a leadership realm.

Leader Identity

Leader identity is the second main focus of this study. Teachers' perceptions of themselves as leaders in relation to their own practice refers to 'leader identity.' Developing this identity can enable teachers to enact teacher leadership in their everyday practice (Cooper, 2014), and to do so knowingly. Sinha and Hanuscin's (2017) study of school teachers defined leader identity as:

> a dynamic characteristic dealing with the perception of self and others. A teacher may perceive her/himself as a teacher leader in various ways, however an intersection occurs when s/he views herself/ himself as a leader due to the leadership activities they do or how they define **'**leadership**'**. (p. 368)

This intersection suggests a link between leadership and leader identity. The following section reviews literature on the role of the teacher leader and how the people and the places that teachers experience, can influence their leader identity journey. These ideas will be discussed in relation to self-perceptions as a teacher leader and mentoring and reflective practice to support leaders' identity.

Self-Perceptions as a Teacher Leader

Literature in the domain of leader identity exists in relation to education but is limited, particularly in ECE. However, ECE research (Cooper, 2014, 2018, 2020; Grarock & Morrissey, 2013) strongly suggests that a focus on leader identity is important if teachers are to embrace the informal role of leading in their everyday practice. This literature emphasises supporting all teachers to negotiate their leader identity and to be in environments where their leader identity can be fostered. One way to promote a sense of leader identity is by contemplating Cooper's (2018) notion of 'everyday teacher leadership' through emphasising notions of advocacy and agency in relation to teachers' practices.

Teachers' self-perceptions are an important aspect of leader identity because for teachers to see themselves as a leader, they also need the ability to recognise that some of roles and responsibilities they enact on a day-to-day basis are indeed leadership practices. Research in this area continues to highlight that many teachers do not perceive themselves as actively leading in their day-to-day practice, even when they are (Collay, 2011; Cooper, 2020; Sinha & Hanuscin, 2017).

Knowledge and experience of leadership do not always contribute to the enactment of leadership or to leader identity development. As Collay (2011) explained, leadership does not come easily to many teachers. She argued that teachers need help recognising that their work in the classroom can be a genuine form of leadership; for example teachers may need a supportive context with invitations to lead, which can reveal their own leadership capabilities. Unfortunately, as Sinha and Hanuscin (2017) revealed, this mismatch prevents teachers from seeing themselves as teacher leaders; that is, developing an identity as a leader. In Grarock and Morrissey's (2013) ECE study, the teachers without formal leadership titles found it difficult to identify an example where they had made an impact on or a change across their service, but they could see their effects within their own rooms. These perceptions again highlight the mixed understandings of leadership of formal and informal roles, as only those with a 'title' were confident in leading change across the centre.

In summary, the literature on self-perceptions of teachers has emphasised the need for supporting them to negotiate their leader identity and to be in environments where their leader identity can be acknowledged and fostered. One way to support leader identity development was identified in Cooper's (2018) study, where teachers felt empowered when they were given opportunities to lead through drawing on their unique skills and knowledge amongst the team. This empowerment of teachers can be supported by formal leaders who embrace distributed pedagogical leadership by sharing and distributing roles and responsibilities that align with individual teachers' strengths, interests and passions.

Mentoring and Reflective Practice to Support Leader Identity Development

Some of the literature on supporting leader identity highlights the importance of empowering teachers through mentoring, coaching, and reflection so they can develop and then see themselves as effective contributors within the team as a part of their own teacher leadership (Collay, 2011; Cooper, 2020; Heikka et al. 2018; Rouse 2015; Sinha & Hanuscin, 2017). One benefit of mentoring and reflective practice is that it supports learning and development for both the mentor and the mentee as an interactive and relational process. Rouse (2015) suggested mentoring and reflective practice as a way to gain fresh perspectives. Personal self-reflection can support the development and transformation of negotiating and fostering a leader identity.

For this to happen, teacher leaders would need support from experienced professionals. This support can be broader than mentoring and coaching. For example, Cooper's (2020) case study acknowledged the importance for teachers to have structural and social support in their own settings, so they can grapple with their understanding of leadership and, in turn, develop their leader identity as it relates to their practice. In alignment with this idea of collaboration, Sinha and Hanuscin's (2017) case study highlighted that collaborative discussions and reflection about challenges and successes supported teachers to develop their leadership practices and broaden their views on what it meant to be a leader. It was through these discussions that teachers were able to unpack leadership and their leader identity in more depth. Findings from Sinha and Hanuscin's case study also outlined the impact of positive experiences where teachers' leadership capabilities were acknowledged from colleagues' feedback and assisted in an increase in confidence with a redefined sense of self. Sinha and Hanuscin (2017) conclude that programs should take into account how colleagues' and others' views are important, and that self-consciousness of personal growth is a significant factor in leader identity development. In support of these ideas, Heikka et al. (2018) stated how in Australia, official recognition of teacher leadership is important in enabling ECE teachers to feel comfortable in providing each other with guidance or mentoring, especially in relation to enacting pedagogical responsibilities across the centre.

In summary, this literature supporting leader identity, mentoring and reflective practice aligns with the idea that having a mentor and engaging in reflective practice can support teachers to enhance their views, practice and their identity of themselves as leaders in their everyday teaching practice. To support and develop their leader identity, teachers need time and space to critically examine and reflect on the image they have of their role as teacher leaders and also their understanding of their place within leadership as everyday teacher leaders. They may also need the support of a mentor or more experienced colleagues to assist in receiving and giving honest and constructive feedback and provide guidance in negotiating their leader identity. These colleagues, both teachers and leaders, would need to have knowledge and experience within the role of supporting and guiding others for this to be a positive and effective experience. This raises the question of "In what ways can this be done, with whom, and how?"

Supportive Relationships for Teacher Leaders

Establishing and maintaining positive and purposeful relationships between all those involved in a teaching team is paramount. *Te Whāriki* (MOE, 2017), which is commonly interpreted through a sociocultural lens, values relationships as a key principle of curriculum experiences. This value highlights the need for opportunities to be made not just within the teaching team itself but also with parents and whānau and the wider community within ECE. Teachers need to be open-minded and have

trust with all those involved within the centre. Establishing and maintaining relationships with each teacher is an important aspect of leadership. Relationships influence team dynamics as a whole, but they also provide inside knowledge of individual teachers' strengths, interests, expertise and passions. As previously mentioned, both pedagogical and distributed leadership can provide opportunities to foster teachers' strengths, interests and passions (Cooper, 2018; Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Thornton et al., 2009).

Collaborative and Collective Leadership

Teacher leadership can be a collective and collaborative practice. Wenger's (1998) notion of a community of practice embraces a collective of individuals who share knowledge and expertise with a shared desired outcome while interacting with each other in practices that reflect the interests of the collective. As teachers in ECE commonly work together in teams, including with formal leaders, the nature of leadership in ECE can be a collective practice of teachers' communities of practice. Clarkin-Phillips et al.'s (2011) study of NZ ECE teachers affirmed Wenger's (1998) notion of a community of practice that influenced teachers' and leaders' participation in distributed leadership practice. Similarly, Thornton and Cherrington's (2014) case study of NZ ECE teachers outlined the importance of professional learning communities, contexts in which teachers learn and develop collaboratively as a team.

Participating in a community of practice can promote teacher leadership and leader identity. For example, Cooper (2014) suggested that the synergies between an effective community of practice and teacher leadership might enable teachers' leader identity to emerge naturally from practice. This can occur when teachers and leaders work collaboratively as a team, sharing, unpacking and reflecting, and reviewing within a culture of trust and respect. Cooper's (2018) study highlighted the importance of collegial experiences when teachers were able to share their ideas and expertise, which in turn, promoted a sense of empowerment. In Cooper's study, the teachers felt affirmed when their contributions were respected and valued by their formal leaders. However, being open and honest can also create tensions. Wenger (1998) highlights how participation in collective discussions can include both conflict and collaboration. These are sometimes known as 'robust' and 'courageous' conversations and can contribute to and support the direction and focus of the setting. For these discussions to occur in a safe and respectful way, they are reliant on individuals being open and honest within a trusting environment. This idea suggests an area worthy of exploration with ECE teachers who typically share teaching practice with formal leaders.

More recently, over the last 10 years, research has begun to reveal the importance of how a collective leadership environment supports and develops teachers' leader identity. Formal leaders can support and

guide the growth of other leaders, including teachers, by engaging in shared discussions and making decisions together as a collective. This idea was highlighted in Ryder et al.'s (2017) qualitative case study of NZ ECE teachers, where growth and development for teachers and leaders were found to occur effectively and positively through a collective and collaborative approach. Another example of this was identified in Cooper's (2018) study, where teachers felt empowered to lead when they were supported to engage in collegial experiences as a team through openly expressing and sharing their ideas and expertise. This reveals how significant the role of the formal leader is in supporting leadership within ECE settings.

In summary, the literature on collaborative and collective leadership indicates that having all team members on board with a shared vision is essential for teachers to feel a sense of belonging where they can be actively involved and contribute to decision-making. The role of formal leaders was clear; that they need to empower and provoke teachers to continuously develop and enhance their pedagogy and practice, and in turn, model the same.

Open Mindedness and Relational Trust

Supportive relationships for teacher leaders involve practising open mindedness and relational trust. Hare (2006) explained open mindedness as being open to new ways of doing things and discovering truths. Being open to others' views, opinions and ideas in a non-judgmental way can support the development of positive and professional relationships through questioning and challenging current situations and being prepared for change (Hare, 2006). It can promote a foundation of tolerance and respect, which in turn encourages and promotes relational trust. This can be practised during team discussions where teachers can take turns leading dialogues where they share their understandings and views to others; these can be based on their own strengths and expertise (Cooper, 2018).

Teacher leadership can be supported through trusting relationships. Bryk and Schneider's (2003) research on school communities in America indicated the effect of the distinct role relationships have within the social exchanges of schooling. These researchers coined the idea of 'relational trust', which is now a well-known term considered in relational activities with others that improve school reform. There are four areas that align to form aspects of relational trust in schools: respect for each other, personal regard of others, teachers' competence in taking core role responsibilities and personal integrity in trusting each other (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). This idea of relational trust could also influence the unique sociocultural contexts of ECE where teachers work alongside each other on a daily basis.

In relation to the ECE context, Thornton and Cherrington (2014) revealed that relational trust is an

important aspect of leadership in ECE settings as it can support collaborative enquiry but also safe places to openly discuss and challenge practice. As mentioned earlier, teachers in ECE work closely as a team, so having leaders who embrace and promote trusting relationships can promote positive collaborations and interactions. Cooper's (2018) study identified that at times tensions can arise in such discussions, for example, when teachers who were leading their colleagues in dialogue needed the support of their positional leaders to keep things moving. Cooper's (2018) finding suggests the powerful and influential role of a leader on creating the conditions needed for teachers to feel empowered to lead in areas of practice. Bøe and Hognestad's study (2016) believed that part of the formal leader's role was to not overlook the everyday staff leadership practices of care and instead ensure consideration of team members, which could involve humour, chatting, and being caring and supporting as an intentional leadership practice.

In summary, these ideas together highlight how the formal leader in a team is a dynamic, intricate and critical role for teacher leadership to develop and thrive. A significant part of the leader's role is establishing and maintaining positive relationships with every teacher. This responsibility can be complex; for example, on the one hand the leader may be a caring friend, and then, on the other hand the leader is also responsible for giving constructive feedback and encouraging teacher leader practice.

Conclusion

Concluding my review of the literature on the broad areas of educational leadership, teacher leadership and leader identity has highlighted several main points. There are a range of complexities of and constraints on educational leadership, including no one clear definition of leadership, mixed perceptions of leadership roles and the ever-changing nature of leadership with people and settings. There are approaches to support teacher leadership enactment in ECE settings. There is the relevance and importance of leader identity. There is an emphasis on supportive relationships for teacher leaders are valuable and consistent with sociocultural theory. The literature highlights that teachers can develop their leader identity by seeing themselves as leaders through acknowledging some of the everyday practices they enact as leadership. There is also the potential for teachers to embrace a sense of identity as leaders if they have knowledge, experience, guidance and support from colleagues and formal leaders. The literature additionally highlights teachers' perceptions that they are not actively leading in their day-to-day practice even when they are and a lack of education and professional learning and development support for developing teacher leadership and leader identity. However, there are suggestions to support teacher's leadership and leader identity; through guidance, mentoring, empowerment, professional learning and development, reflective and collaborative practice and environments that promote shared leadership practices. These are significant and valuable reasons to undertake further research.

This review also illuminates gaps in the research literature. These gaps include ways to support teacher leadership and leader identity through guidance, encouragement, collaborative and collective practice, and professional learning and development that reflects the unique social and contextual nature of ECE. These gaps and the paucity of ECE research on teacher leadership and leader identity identify an urgent focus on research in these areas.

The Research Questions

The findings and the gaps in the literature informed the overarching question of this study:
What are teachers' views, perceptions and experiences of educational leadership and leader identity?
To support this investigation, the following questions were developed as a result of the literature review.

The first sub-question was informed by the scant literature available on ECE teachers' views about leadership concepts and practices based on their own experiences.

- What are ECE teachers' views around the types of leadership practice they have experienced?

The second sub-question was developed in response to the gap on literature regarding leader identity in ECE, to specifically explore how teachers perceive themselves as leaders or not and also how they may view their everyday practices as experiences of leadership.

- What are ECE teachers' perceptions of themselves as leaders?

The third sub-question was informed by identification of the paucity of support for teachers to evidence leadership as part of their everyday practices to explore who, what, and how leader identity could be negotiated and developed.

- What knowledge and experience might support ECE teachers to negotiate and develop their own leader identity?

The following chapter outlines the research design, introducing and justifying the methodology and methods chosen and the ethical issues considered and addressed to explore teachers' views, perceptions, and experiences of leadership and leader identity.

Chapter Three
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The literature review in the previous chapter reviewed literature on educational leadership, teacher leadership and leader identity and identified research gaps in relation to teacher leadership in ECE and ECE teachers' views and perceptions of themselves as leaders, specifically the phenomenon of teachers acknowledging and negotiating their own leader identity. Teacher leadership was also highlighted as a social construct. This chapter begins with an overview of the chosen research design, detailing and justifying the methodology chosen for this study. Following this, the research context is introduced, including the research sites, gaining access, specified criterion of both the site and the participants, and a description of their profiles. From here, the ethical considerations involved in my study are acknowledged, followed by an explanation of the importance of credibility and trustworthiness. Lastly, the data gathering process and data analysis implemented in my study are described.

Qualitative, Interpretive Methodology

Being part of a team is a significant uniqueness of teaching and leading in ECE. My study, therefore, required a qualitative research design based on my view that teaching and leadership in ECE are about collective and social action and reflect the things people do and how they are socially constructed (Punch & Oancea, 2014). A key task of qualitative research is to explicate how people in particular settings come to understand, account for, take action, and manage their day-to-day situations and experiences (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A qualitative approach supports this type of study due to a focus on gathering and analysing teachers' in-depth meanings, views and understandings (Punch & Oancea, 2014), specifically of leadership and their leader identity. A descriptive research design aligns with the research questions as the study aims to describe teachers' views, perceptions and understandings about their experiences in depth. These may be either their own interactions and practice or their observations of others. One main purpose of my study was to elicit personal and professional understandings of a certain phenomenon: teachers' views of leadership and self-perceptions of leader identity. This required an interpretive stance, which involved a focus on the meanings people bring with them to certain situations, and their behaviours which they use to make sense of their world (O'Donoghue, 2007). Using a qualitative, descriptive and interpretive research design my study, therefore, assisted in exploring and describing teachers' views, perceptions and experiences of educational leadership.

Research Context

This section describes the sampling strategy and the criteria for selection of the research sites and participants. It outlines the process of gaining access to both sites and inviting the participants within. Next, it explains the criterion selection for the participants. Following this, details of the two research sites are described, and finally the participants' profile is introduced.

Criteria for the Research Sites

The two early childhood services involved in my study were selected using a purposive, non-random sampling strategy (Miles & Huberman, 1994) within the Auckland area, from those listed on the MOE database of licensed centres. Two different types of ECE organisations were selected; one a kindergarten operating under a larger umbrella organisation, and the other, a private centre part of a small organisation. This selection enabled access to a variety of leadership experiences as each organisation had different types of leadership structures.

The services were selected and invited based on two main criteria. The first criterion is that they would be located within the Auckland area, to address constraints on resources and time. The second criterion is that each service needed a minimum of two qualified and certificated teachers with teaching experience of a minimum of two years. This meant I would have access to two to three teachers from each setting who would be willing to volunteer as participants.

Gaining Access to the Sites and Participants

Once I had obtained approval from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (19 September 2019) and prior to accessing potential participants I made contact with a kindergarten organisation to seek potential sites that could be involved in my study. I approached the kindergarten management via email with an initial contact letter to outline my research and share relevant forms. These were the approval letter from the ethics committee, the centre owner/manager participant information sheet (PIS) and consent form (CF) (Appendix A and B), and the teacher participant PIS and CF (Appendix C and D). Once email consent was obtained from kindergarten management I was given the names of three kindergartens to approach to seek written approval from the head teacher. I approached the head teacher of the first kindergarten via an email and she consented to the kindergarten's participation. I then gained access to potential participants via the kindergarten administrator who distributed the PISs and CFs to all eligible teachers on my behalf, guided by the principle of voluntary participation. This resulted in three teachers from that kindergarten volunteering to take part in my study and sending their CFs direct to me.

For the second research site, I contacted a centre that was part of a small group of childcare centres. I approached the head teacher via an initial phone call who expressed an interest. Following this I sent her senior, the centre manager, an email with an initial contact letter to outline my research and share relevant forms. These were the approval letter from the ethics committee, the centre owner/manager PIS and CF (Appendix A and B), the teacher participant PIS and CF (Appendix C and D) .Once consent was obtained from the centre manager, a centre administrator distributed the PISs and CFs on my behalf. Then three willing participants came forward, sending me their written consent.

Participant Criterion

A purposive, criterion, non-random sampling strategy was implemented to select and invite participants to volunteer in the study. This type of sampling is deliberate with a specific purpose and focus in mind (Punch & Oancea, 2014). The participants represented the following criteria: they were qualified, certificated ECE teachers who had either previously held or never held a leadership role or were currently in a leadership role within any ECE context. They were to have a minimum of two years of teaching experience. Selecting qualified and certificated teachers with a minimum of two years teaching experience enabled a focus on those teachers who have completed a teaching qualification as well as having an ongoing advice and guidance programme and regular appraisals for teacher certification, in accordance with the formal expectations of the Teaching Council of Aotearoa NZ (See Chapter 2, p. 13). Including teachers who have either previously held or never held a leadership role, allowed for a range of perspectives and experiences to be shared. It also enabled their beliefs, perceptions and experiences of educational leadership and leader identity to be identified. This participant criterion aligns with Miles and Huberman's (1994) recommendation to ensure sampling generates believable accounts directly from teacher's real-life experiences to bring the phenomenon to light in relation to the research questions.

Research Site Profile

Site one is a kindergarten comprising of four qualified and certificated teachers. One of these teachers is in a formal leadership role, known as the "head teacher". There are also two additional unqualified staff members, one who covers teachers' breaks and the other an administrator. The kindergarten is licensed for a maximum of 40 children aged between 2 ½ to 5 years old for 4 hours between 8:45am to 12:45pm. A maximum of 30 of these children stay on and attend for the full day for six hours between 8:45am to 2:45pm Monday to Friday. The children, teachers, and the head teacher share the same teaching and learning space, excluding lunch breaks. The kindergarten had been purposely built as an ECE environment.

Site two is a private education and care centre. This centre is licensed for up to 32 children to attend each day. It is a mixed aged centre with children ranging from 6 months to 5 years old. There are five qualified, certificated teachers; one of these is the designated head teacher who supports the teaching team, and completes administrative tasks during quiet times. There is also one untrained teacher and a cook. The centre opens from 7.00am to 5.30pm, Monday to Friday. The children, teachers and head teacher share the same teaching and learning space, with staggered start and finish times and rotating lunch breaks. The centre is a converted home.

Participant Profile

There were six participants in this study; three from each site. The participants chose or gave pseudonyms to protect their identities. The participants from site one are known as Georgia, Sally and Millie. The participants from site two are known as Lisa, Katrina and Emily. All participants were qualified and certificated teachers. Emily (site two), also has a formal role as a head teacher. The formal leader from site one was not part of this study, but is referred to in the study as "head teacher". At the time of the study each of these teachers had ECE teaching experience that varied from six to 25 years.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were taken into account and influenced my decisions throughout this study (Cullen, Hedges, & Bone, 2009). Firstly, I will describe the informed consent process both the managers and participants signed and agreed to. Then I will discuss the confidentiality factors that were considered for the participants and the sites. Finally, I will explain the minimisation of risks during the study and the benefits for the participants.

Informed Consent

Gaining informed consent was an important part of the initial process when participants chose to volunteer and consent to be part of my study (Christians, 2005). Informed consent meant participants had a clear understanding of what their involvement would be throughout the study, such as their participation in one individual interview and a focus group and that these would be audio recorded and transcribed by myself as the researcher. On my behalf, a centre/kindergarten administrator distributed the PIS and CF to eligible participants. Once the participants volunteered to take part in the study, they signed and returned the CF, which outlined their and my roles and responsibilities in the research. An assurance was sought from the centre manager/owner that staff would have the choice to participate or not and that this would not affect their relationship with the centre/kindergarten. Interested teachers sent their signed CF to me by email or gave them to me in person when I first visited the centre.

Confidentiality

Participants were informed that confidentiality could not be fully guaranteed due to the nature of the early childhood sector being small as some of their experiences and stories may reveal their identity, but all efforts were made to keep their identities confidential. This involved the use of pseudonyms to replace participants' real names and the names of the ECE settings. The identities of participants were of course evident to all participants when taking part in the focus group, but again, pseudonyms were used in the reporting of the data.

Minimisation of Risk, and Benefits for Participants

Throughout this study, I aimed to minimise the risk of causing harm to others and to potentially carry out worthwhile and meaningful research (Punch & Oancea, 2014). The participants were reminded of the details of their and my roles and responsibilities at the beginning of the focus group and individual interviews. They were also given an invitation to receive a copy of the findings once the study was complete. Additionally, the participants also received their individual transcripts for editing and verification. The participants were informed of benefitting from participation in the study by having a chance to articulate their views to someone who is interested in hearing them and learning something new to inform their future leadership practice.

Participants' Right to Withdraw

Participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw themselves at any time, and their data up to the point of data analysis, without giving a reason. The centre owner/manager also had the right to withdraw the organisation from this research up until the start of data analysis, without giving a reason. Participants' right to withdraw their data and control over what to reveal during the research was explained in the PIS and CF, as well as before the start of the interview. This included the participants' right to request to turn off the digital voice recorder at any time during the interview without giving a reason. However, during the focus group participants were told they were not able to request the recorder to be turned off, but they could remain silent or leave the room, without giving a reason.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of a study depends on its credibility. Shenton (2004) explains credibility as how the study represents true accounts of a particular phenomenon. The researcher must ensure they validate their findings using excerpts from data to draw conclusions from rather than their own predispositions. To ensure scholarly rigour and discipline, each phase of my study had credibility and trustworthiness at the forefront. For example, the participants were invited to take part in the study by the centre/kindergarten administrator, with permission from the centre/manager owner. I did not have an existing relationship with the kindergarten and the centre teams. Also, having a focus group before

the individual interviews gave participants a sense of comfort as they were with their peers and they could bounce ideas off each other. Following the focus groups, I invited and encouraged the participants to share their individual views and perceptions during their individual interviews. This meant they were able to disclose and share their views without being influenced by others with me in a one-on-one situation.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2013) guidance for thematic analysis, my data analysis involved a rigorous and systematic process with transparency of how the data was coded with the use of quotes from participants' thick rich descriptions within the transcripts with all analysed data considered. My supervisor verified the data to ensure meanings and interpretations were accurate. Participants had the option to check their transcript for verification up until two weeks following the receipt of their interview transcript. This process resulted in one participant requesting some changes to her transcript. These were actioned, resulting in a few minor edits within the names of roles to prevent her from being identified too easily. Due to the group nature of the focus groups, transcripts could not be shared with participants for editing, as doing so would change the meaning of the collaborative discussion.

Data Gathering

To enable an in-depth study of teachers' views and perceptions, data were collected using three methods: focus groups, individual interviews, and a review of centre documentation. The focus group and the interviews took place at a time and location that suited the centre/kindergarten and the participants.

The first data gathering method involved implementing a focus group (Appendix E) in each of the two sites. These were carried out prior to the individual interviews. Both the focus group and individual interviews were audio-recorded with each interviewee's permission. Each focus group was carried out as a group discussion with all of the participants from one setting who contributed their views and understandings. During the focus groups, I used a range of open-ended questions to promote broader discussions about the notion of leadership, working together as a team, and how/what leadership looks like in their setting on a daily basis. Morgan (1997) indicated how focus groups can give opportunities for the researcher to observe how a group of people interact and engage on a topic, giving direct similarities and differences in the participants' views and experiences. Using everyday language, I introduced the topic in a way that they understood and to also get them thinking. These focus groups gave me some initial insight to the participants' views, perceptions and experiences of leadership which highlighted possible paths to follow up on during the individual interviews. They also enabled me to build up a rapport with the participants and establish a sense of transparency and trust in a safe and respectful way which laid the foundation for the interviews.

The second data collection method involved individual, semi-structured interviews (Appendix F) to gather participants' individual views, perceptions and experiences of leadership and leader identity – the phenomenon of my study. These individual interviews were two-way conversations between myself and each participant and were carried out in their own centre/kindergarten at a time that suited them. They allowed each participant to disclose and share their views without feeling influenced by others. A set of pre-determined open-ended questions were used, with the inclusion of other questions that naturally emerged during our dialogue (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Prompts were used for further clarification and to provide more in-depth data, while ensuring in-built flexibility during the interviews (Punch & Oancea, 2014). An initial pilot trial interview was carried out with an ECE colleague resulting in some of the questions being modified. One example change was to the question 'As a team what experiences do you think might support a teacher to take on a leadership role in this place?' which was revised to 'What experiences do you think might support a teacher to take on a leadership role?' The rationale and benefits of two interview methods used in my study allowed me to access a wide range of experiences, both group and individual, and to delve in depth in relation to social and personal matters, ensuring rich, deep data (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Finally, the third data collection method carried out was an analysis of selected centre documentation to obtain some background information of the centre and the participants' roles. This documentation included the centre/kindergarten philosophy, generic job descriptions and duties and responsibilities for teachers and leaders. I requested this documentation from the centre owner/manager before the focus group and interviews were conducted. This was done to support the links between the data collected in the focus group and individual interviews.

Analysis of Data

Making sense and analysing the data from the focus group and the individual interviews involved a systematic process of reading and writing and thoroughly re-checking the data transcripts. In alignment with Braun and Clarke's (2013) thematic analysis steps, I carried out the following processes. First, once transcripts were verified, I transcribed the data from the audio-recording of the focus groups. Through this, I was able to become familiar with some of the views and perceptions that were shared within the focus group. I made notes of some of the key ideas that arose and used these to shape and form some of the questions used in the subsequent individual interviews. I used the same process of thoroughly reading, writing and transcribing the data of the individual interviews. Second, I manually coded the data, and highlighted words and sentences that had connections to the key words in my research questions, including codes that presented new ideas and understandings within my topic. Thematic analysis generates codes from the bottom up as an inductive qualitative data analysis

approach (Braun & Clarke, 2013). My coding system also used memoing, grouping and classifying similar meanings within the data to develop themes (Punch & Oancea, 2014). From these codes I was able to cluster them into sub-themes and themes, and I also included infrequent codes depending on each individuals' experiences. I searched, reviewed and finalised these derived themes in order to answer the research questions. From here I used the derived themes to make connections and links to the centre documentation. This process also enabled me to analyse the data in a meaningful, transparent and rigorous way, and to foreground participants' accounts by using quotes from the participants' transcripts. Lastly, these themes were revisited and refined during the composing of the discussion chapter, and this was to also reveal and examine any different or unexpected findings from the literature. An example of one my themes was 'respectful and inclusive relationships', some of the sub themes under this theme were 'effective communication' and 'collaboration' and some of the codes under these sub themes were 'open and honest communication', 'a good listener' and 'shared vision'.

I aligned my approach with Braun and Clarke's (2020) reflexive thematic analysis, which embraces the researcher's role of their own knowledge production as being vital to this approach. This is where my theoretical knowingness and transparency were applied, for example, the themes were based on creative and interpretive stories derived from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2020). The time I spent carefully reading and looking at the data enabled me to engage reflectively and thoughtfully to develop and construct the ideas that were present in the data.

Conclusion

This chapter has explained and justified the qualitative, interpretive research design of my study. The research sites have been described, including some background information about the participants. This chapter has acknowledged the ethical considerations addressed in this study, including informed consent, confidentiality, minimisation of risk, and benefits for participants and participant's right to withdraw. This was followed by the importance of credibility and trustworthiness. Conducting a focus group in each of the two sites, the use of individual, semi-structured interviews, and a review of relevant centre documentation as data gathering methods were explained and justified. Finally, the data analysis process was clarified and justified. The following chapter will introduce and describe the findings that were identified from the thematic data analysis, evidenced from all three sources.

Chapter Four
FINDINGS

This chapter introduces the main findings identified during the qualitative data analysis of the focus group, individual interviews, and the review of centre/kindergarten documentation, including job descriptions and centre philosophy statements. The data were analysed using an inductive thematic approach which helped me uncover four key themes related to the phenomenon of teachers' views, perceptions and experiences of leadership and leader identity. These themes are: the complexities of leadership in ECE contexts; respectful and inclusive relationships; mixed views and perceptions of leadership and leader identity and; empowering teacher leadership through invitation, encouragement, and the sharing of roles and responsibilities. These themes are illustrated below, using quotes from the focus groups, individual interviews, and centre documentation. Data sources from site one will be abbreviated as: focus group (FG-1), individual interview (II-1), and centre documentation (CD-1). For site two, these will be: (FG-2), (II-2) and (CD-2). To illustrate the themes, I will draw on the data from both centres for a holistic exploration of the phenomenon.

Complexities of Leadership in ECE

The study found that teachers viewed leadership as a complex concept and practice as it: is multi-faceted, is ever evolving, and can be used as a position of power and control.

Leadership as Multi-faceted

All six teachers viewed leadership as a complex notion that involves a range of differing attributes and approaches through positive and negative experiences. Sally, Emily and Lisa viewed the concept of leadership as being unknown, open-ended and varied. In particular, Sally had experienced leadership in a various ways, both positive and negative, which had then informed her view of leadership as confusing and a bit of a "hit and miss." Sally reflected:

> *When I hear the word leadership in ECE it's kind of has a big question mark for me […] I have seen some really good examples of leaders and some really poor examples of leaders, both as a manager and as a teacher. So, I think it can be unfortunately really hit and miss (Sally, II-1).*

For Emily, the notion of leadership was fluid. She expressed:

> *It is so open-ended (Emily, II-2)*

Similarly, Lisa mentioned her positive and negative experiences, highlighting the value of trust:

> *I have met some really amazing leaders in ECE and people in management and inspirational people […] I have had really good leaders and really bad leaders. People that you can't trust and people that you can (Lisa, II-2).*

Millie and Katrina commented on how leadership is complex as it can reveal different values and "looks" and can also be different from one environment to another. Millie noted:

> *I think it is really complex and I think there is not one look. I have seen it in loads of different styles and roles […] I don't think it's one, I think it is a whole lot of different values and attributes (Millie, II-1).*

Katrina referred more generally to the idea of "different" leadership:

> *It's interesting because the centres [I have worked in] have been very different in leadership (Katrina, II-2).*

Other teachers, Georgia and Sally, acknowledged how formal leadership is not as easy as it looks and that it takes time, patience and experience to do it well. Georgia stated:

> *I don't think you really understand what's involved in a head teacher's role until you are sitting in that head teacher's chair […]. Learning to be a leader isn't something that happens overnight (Georgia, II-1).*

Sally's view was similar, although she emphasised the importance of having to deal with unexpected situations:

> *Everyone comes in and you think that you know all of the things and then you go and do the job and […] all these random situations pop up that you never expected to have, and you've got to have some experience around that too, to deal with them (Sally, II-1).*

Both head teacher job descriptions were based on the professional teaching standards in *Our Code, Our Standards* (EC, 2017). Site two's head teacher job description mentioned positive aspects related to leadership, including collaborative and collegial learning, applying current practices of effective leadership, and to also improving team effectiveness, encouraging vision and innovation. Site one's head teacher job description also had positive aims in relation to effective communication with and

within the team. “Relationship management” was stated as a key standard, but this focussed on communication and conflict resolution and not specific leadership approaches such as promoting leadership through sharing roles and responsibilities. The idea of leadership as a diverse and multifaceted practice was not evident in these job descriptions, overlooking the teachers’ point about needing to be prepared for unexpected situations and knowing what you need to know in certain situations.

Overall, the teachers shared a view that leadership is not always easy to learn about, understand, and enact because of the different ways people lead, dealing with unanticipated situations in different ECE contexts, and the time it takes to develop leadership knowledge and skills. Although head teacher job descriptions outlined leadership expectations, these mainly focused on management, administration tasks and broad outcomes. The teachers’ comments suggest that there is a lot more to learn about leadership from experience and practice, revealing it is a social and relational practice.

Leadership as Ever Evolving

In responses to questions about what they think of in relation to the word leadership and their own experiences of leadership, the teachers emphasised the idea that leadership approaches develop and are enhanced as contexts, teaching teams, roles and responsibilities evolve over time. Five of the teachers viewed leadership as ever evolving. For example, Georgia reflected on how things regarding leadership have changed over time with people’s increased awareness of effective leadership and changes in the kindergarten context:

> *Over the years I have worked in so many different places, I think leadership style has changed. […] I think people are more aware of what a good leader is and what it looks like […] Kindergartens in general have changed a lot so I think leadership styles have changed as well (Georgia, II-1).*

Similarly, Lisa shared how her perceptions of leadership had developed in relation to her experiences of both “good” and “bad” leaders over the years:

> *For me it has always come in waves, as in like good leaders and bad leaders. I always take little bits of everybody, what you do and don’t appreciate. It’s been over twenty years, so it’s been a long time (Lisa, II-2).*

Lisa also reflected on how she would now deal with things differently than she had done in the past because her own leadership capability and confidence had evolved.

But I was quite young then so probably didn't perhaps know how to speak my mind, which I might now (Lisa, FG-2).

Similarly, Emily reflected on how her teaching and leadership practice has developed and evolved because of the experiences she'd had with others:

When I think about it for my actual practice, and it has evolved a lot […] most of the things I think now, because of people or relationships or communities that I have experienced or been a part of (Emily, II-2).

Like Lisa and Emily, Millie and Katrina talked about how their understandings of leadership had evolved as part of their own growth and development. Millie referred to drawing "from the past":

You start to build up a strong picture of quality and what good leadership looks like […] I think teaching is that sort of job, it's evolving, you know you always taking little things from the past and it's always changing your teaching practice and your outlook (Millie, II-2).

In contrast, Katrina commented on two vastly different perceptions of leadership. When she was probed about whether these two contrasting views were from her own experience, she responded by explaining that her experiences had changed her perceptions of leadership overtime:

When I started in ECE and I knew absolutely nothing, and I had come straight from high school and I was really shy and quite intimidated by people in leadership roles (Katrina, II-2).

Teachers' individual views and perceptions, therefore, indicate how perceptions of leadership knowledge and practice have developed and been enhanced over time based on individual experiences with different people and contexts.

Leadership as Power and Control Over Others

The study found that teachers' negative experiences of leadership were perceived as power and control over others. All of the teachers reflected on experiences where leaders from their past had used their leadership role as a position of power over the team in negative ways. Lisa, Georgia and Katrina shared similar experiences of a colleague in a formal leadership position who had used their role of power to control others. Lisa also spoke about her experiences of leaders who were "control freaks" because they felt that controlling others was part of their role:

Leadership comes with power and sometimes people can hold that power over others […] I've had experiences with people who are control freaks and who just want you to do what they tell you to do […] for people to feel like they can control others because of their role and their responsibilities (Lisa, II-2).

In the focus group, Lisa shared a negative experience where her boss had "cut [her] down to size":

[My boss] didn't agree with what I was doing so then would cut me down to size without any conversation without any dialogue. It was 'this is what it looks like you've done wrong', end of story (Lisa, FG-2).

Millie and Georgia highlighted their experiences in relation to the differences between a top down and a bottom up leadership style. Millie stated:

I have seen it in differing levels from going down and from the bottom up (Millie, II-1).

Georgia's experience was similar:

She was like up here and we, the rest of us were down here. […] So, she made all of the decisions and told us what we were doing and how we were going do it. There wasn't a lot of two-way conversation. […] She was very set in her ways (Georgia, II-1).

Katrina shared contrasting views of leadership, one where the leader was above her and another leader who was on the same playing field as teachers. She explained:

When I first hear of [leadership], I do think of 'Boss' looking down and trying to impress them. That is how I first view it […] Here, it's a lot less like that and especially with Emily […] she is more one of us than opposed to bossing us around […] I think it has gone from more of up here to looking down, more to like a foundation up (Katrina, II-2).

Similarly, Sally talked about a leader who was on the same level as a teacher and added that this leader was also willing to let go and allow others to step up:

I think you need to be open to the fact that you if you are supporting others to lead, so it's a little bit [like] maybe letting go of the reigns to let somebody else to have a turn to do it (Sally II-1).

This idea of a leader "letting go" was also expressed by Emily, who acknowledged the responsibility of her own powerful position as a leader and how this can influence her to "let go" of the idea she is the only one who can lead:

> *When you are the person in charge there is a lot of power that comes with that so that's a big responsibility that you are respecting and upholding what's important to everyone not just running your own game. […] And I think a big part of that is letting go of ego and thinking that you are the only person that can be a leader (Emily, II-2).*

Emily, therefore felt she had a significant responsibility to ensure her leadership came from the bottom up, rather than from the top down or as power and control over others.

The head teacher job descriptions of both sites included words such as 'manage' with an emphasis on meeting and complying with standards and specific accountabilities regarding teaching standards. Both descriptions also included terms such as 'motivate and support' 'understand and apply' 'provide, foster, develop'. However, these ideas were able to be interpreted differently based on the range of diverse personalities and experiences of leaders where things could be done way one or the other. There are indeed mixed messages between controlling, individualistic, collegial, and inclusive practices. Overall, this evidence clearly highlights teachers' diverse views about leadership, suggesting it is open to interpretation based on one's experiences and observations of others' leadership practice and how these shape each individual's knowledge and understanding of leadership.

Respectful and Inclusive Relationships

Another finding was that establishing and maintaining relationships was seen as critical to how an effective leader creates a positive, inclusive and collaborative environment where teachers feel respected and included. Teachers emphasised respectful communication, caring relationships, and leading collaboratively.

Respectful Communication and Caring Relationships

Building positive and professional relationships within a team reflects leadership practice that promotes open and honest communication based on trust, respect, kindness and care. When asked about her own positive experiences of effective leadership, Emily reflected on a time where she had observed a leader engaging with a fellow colleague with respect, in a kind and caring way:

The examples that leap out to me the most are based in kindness and care for kaiako. She [a leader] showed such nuanced care, like she showed that she knew that teacher really well and the way that they needed to be spoken to but also the way that they needed to have space to express how they were feeling […] Whānaungatanga/relationships is definitely is most of it, if not all of it (Emily, II-2).

This expression of respect, kindness and care was consistent with Emily's centre (site two) philosophy statement, which proposed that the centre climate supports kindness, holistic development and aroha (Māori: love/care).

Tamariki/children, kaiako/teachers and whānau/family can feel at home knowing their physical, emotional, spiritual and social well-being is taken care of […] We believe in a culture of kindness (CD-2).

Other teachers viewed a leader's open and honest communication as an important aspect of collaboration and developing a sense of belonging. This view echoed what was shared during the group interview where Katrina and Lisa described the leadership practice of their leader, Emily. Katrina said:

Emily's really cool, she'll listen to you […] I feel valued, a sense of belonging, you work harder. [We] just communicate all the time about what's going on and how we are (Katrina, FG-2).

Lisa added that their leader's approach to communication made her feel welcome and motivated to do better:

You also make us feel like our voice is valued. It's not like do this because you have to do it, you say what do you think about this? It's the way you ask about it […] It motivates you to do better, rather than just being told what to do […] We communicate so well with each other. […] It's awesome we have got really good relationships with each other and easy to talk to and we help each other […] Yeah and just reading each other (Lisa, FG-2).

Lisa also talked about the value of caring in her individual interview when she talked about her current leader Emily, "being there" for the teachers. When asked whether she meant "caring", Lisa agreed and explained:

I feel like that if anything was to happen she would definitely be there for us […] Someone that cares for the teachers as well as the numbers and the children (Lisa, II-2).

Emily then considered that her leadership communication helps to strengthen team collaboration and relationships based on trust, respect and aroha:

> *It's definitely one of the indicators of a strong team […] open communication every day, and everyone is happy because we know that we can rely on each other. […] The strength of our relationships, which is based on trust, mutual respect but also like aroha, like that we have for each and other and the children (Emily, FG-2).*

Trusting relationships based on regular, open and honest communication were also valued by Georgia, Sally and Millie as a significant component of being an effective leader. In her interview, Georgia expressed:

> *Having a head teacher that you can be honest and talk with. Because I've had head teachers that it's been really hard to talk to and you don't feel great (Georgia, II-1).*

Similarly, Sally and Millie highlighted the importance of a leader being open and honest but also supportive and respectful of one's "mana" (Māori: empowerment/respect). Sally said:

> *I think you've got to be able to have that trust to have really open conversations so you can talk about things and celebrate when it's going right […] But then at the same time if things aren't going right then the way that is approached is done in a kind way, in a respectful way, in a way that everyone can walk away from it with their 'mana' upheld (Sally, II-1).*

During the focus group, Sally had reiterated to her colleagues how when she first started she felt the culture of the team was professional and everyone was respectful of each other. She shared:

> *Being the newest member of the team […] I think that everybody has high professionalism and is really respectful so you can have an honest korero/talk about what ever might be happening, and people aren't going to get touchy (Sally, FG-1).*

Millie talked about an experience where she had supported and encouraged her leader to go home when she was unwell. She also expressed that being an effective leader was one who embraces and practises the same standards for everyone in the team:

You treat your team how you want to be treated. And it's reciprocated, like when I want to go home (Millie, FG-1).

During the focus group, Millie and Georgia commented on how listening to each other's perspectives is what makes a good leader and that this can have a positive influence on outcomes for teachers. Millie stated:

She just listened for a long time, just talked to us all and was really respectful. For me when I really respect someone they get a better version from me because I would want to do my best […] I could just see the change in us all (Millie, II-1).

I think there is a lot of respect between us which means when we are sitting down and having planning meetings we really take on board and listen to each other (Millie, FG-1).

Georgia stated:

I like the way she discusses things with us, and I mean I know she has the final decision as she is the head teacher, but she does listen to everyone and respects what we have to say I think that makes her a really great leader (Georgia, FG-1).

Developing a strong sense of belonging and identity can be supported by establishing and maintaining relationships that are inclusive and respectful of others. This idea was highlighted in Sally, Millie and Georgia's kindergarten (site one) philosophy statement:

As a whānau/family we all have the right to belong […] the many places where we have a sense of tūrangawaewae – the places we feel empowered and identify with together (CD-1).

In summary, open and honest communication was viewed as an important factor in being a leader who practises communication based on respect, kindness and aroha. This evidence demonstrates how being given a voice afforded these teachers a sense of belonging and motivated them to do better.

Leading Collaboratively

The study found a shared view amongst teachers of the importance of the formal leader fostering an inclusive environment. This is where everyone's ideas and contributions are valued and considered and a leader leads with a clear vison and focus. Supportive of this idea, Emily acknowledged the importance of collaboration sitting alongside leadership in ECE.

When I hear the word leadership. I think in ECE I usually will always think about kotahitanga, so collaboration (Emily, II-2).

Lisa, Georgia, Millie and Sally felt it was important and beneficial for a leader to have a clear vision and focus and to set goals collaboratively as a team. For example, Lisa stated:

I think a leader has a responsibility to bring her team together to get them to work really well, and co-operatively with a shared vision (Lisa, II-2).

The same reference to collaboration was also apparent in Georgia's response about a leader's vision that brings the team together:

You have to have someone who has that vision and lets everyone else know the vision of where you are going so that you can all work together. Depending on the leader it's how well the team works together (Georgia, II-1)

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With reference to her previous leader, Millie shared two contrasting experiences of a leader who was unclear with direction and another leader who was clear with expectations which supported team collaboration and productivity:

She had a focus, but it was never clear, the direction we were going in. We would chop and change […] And I always felt disorganised. But now here, […] I know what I need to be doing every day and that makes it so much easier to be productive (Millie, II-1).

She came in from the beginning saying 'this is the expectation, I will be sharing this around.' I mean she was very clear […] I think we all really respect her yeah, and so because of that we all strive to support her well (Millie, FG-1).

This emphasis on clear and collaborative leadership resonated in Millie's kindergarten philosophy statement, which valued a sense of belonging to a community based on inclusive and collaborative practice.

It is through the shared contributions and values we grow deeper understandings and respect about ourselves as a community of learners […] As respectful/whakaute contributors we discover ways to be creative, expressive, curious, and find meaning in the world around us together (CD-1).

Similarly, Sally valued a leader having clear expectations but also being open to others' ideas. She believed this can have positive outcomes for teachers. Sally stated:

> *Thinking of a good leader, a specific person, it's somebody who shows you really clearly, this is what this place looks like, so these are the policies, these are our expectations […] But within that we will give you the freedom to do what your job is and allows you to have input and have ideas and those ideas are valued. They [effective leaders] are open to other perspectives and they give/show respect to the people that they are involved in. […] The opportunity to go off and weave your own little thing…And that [teachers] are trusted to do that and that your ideas are valued (Sally, II-1).*

Obstructing collaboration by not giving teachers a say was viewed as a negative experience by Georgia, Millie and Katrina, who shared their experiences of a leader who would not consider colleagues' ideas. Georgia shared:

> *Not having any say yourself and if you did get an option to talk, a lot of the time your ideas would not be considered (Georgia, II-1).*

Millie shared an experience where teachers had to "fight for our opinion" with a leader who was fixed and inflexible:

> *She had a strong vision, really intelligent, knew all of the paperwork and everything […] but just was pushing us constantly in a direction that only she wanted to go and there was very little flexibility […] Everything crumbled under her and we weren't effective because we were trying to fight for our opinion (Millie, II-1).*

Similarly, Katrina appreciated her previous leader but felt she was inconsistent in her support and collaboration:

> *I loved my boss; she was very supportive of me but there were times where I have witnessed her not being supportive of other staff members. […] We had this one teacher that I know she clashed with […] her values and I think she wouldn't listen and try and see the other teacher's side (Katrina, II-2).*

Millie's and Katrina's comments highlight how one can have experience and knowledge of ECE, but having effective leadership practice and relationships and being able to foster collaboration, are a different set of skills altogether.

Emily commented about the importance of collaboration within a team from her own perspective as a leader. She reflected on how making changes as a leader can take time to collaborate and have everyone included and involved:

> *Something that is very slow, and it takes a lot of time and in order for it to be sustained and successful you need the entire team to be on board and you need to bring everyone along with you not be way up-front calling back to them (Emily, II-2).*

The philosophy statements of both contexts valued relationships as a key attribute in their beliefs and practices. Reciprocal and respectful relationships embraced collaborative and shared leadership amongst the team.

Together, these comments revealed teachers' shared perception that listening to or taking on one another's values, opinions and ideas was a key component in how a leader can effectively collaborate with the team. Overall, the teachers viewed developing collaborative relationships as a significant aspect of being an effective leader in promoting a positive, respectful, inclusive and supportive environment for individuals and the team. This, in turn, can promote a safe environment for teachers to be active participants and contributors to the team. This context of collaboration and sharing ideas seemed to be a stepping stone for teachers to embrace their leader identity.

Mixed Views and Perceptions of Leadership and Leader Identity

The study found that teachers held mixed views, feelings, and perceptions about themselves as leaders, including if they welcomed invitations to lead, or if they sought leadership opportunities on their own accord. This finding included teachers' self-perceptions of formal and informal leadership roles, and receiving recognition for leadership activities.

Self-perceptions of Formal and Informal Leadership Roles

There were similar acknowledgements from Katrina, Millie and Georgia in how they saw themselves as individuals or as part of a team in leading within their day-to-day practice. They commented on how you can practise everyday teacher leadership without having a positional role or title. For example, Katrina stated:

I think all the staff here have important roles because we are such a small team I do feel like we all have leadership duties […] things like setting up for the day, taking ownership of children's learning and learning stories and things like that. There is leadership in all of that (Katrina, II-2).

Millie reflected on how she preferred to lead in areas that she is passionate about but not in a positional leadership role. Millie stated:

I'll never be a head teacher. I like to sit underneath someone else and that is where I am much more comfortable […] Not in a positional role but […] I will naturally pick up things like Enviroschools because it is my passion, and so I find that really easy to do (Millie, II-1).

Georgia mentioned the head teacher's extra responsibilities and acknowledged how as a team they take on responsibilities of the kindergarten, but at the end of the day the "buck stops" with the head teacher. Georgia viewed the head teacher role as having overall responsibility for the kindergarten and making the final decisions about things. It was this responsibility that deterred Georgia from wanting to take on a leadership role:

[My head teacher] probably has that extra responsibility but the buck stops with her. But otherwise, we are all doing the same things and working together. It's just she has more paperwork (Georgia, FG-1).

I don't feel like I have leadership qualities. I don't think I'd be very good at delegating and I know I would listen to people and that. […] I find the paperwork is a serious part of the job and head teachers have so much more responsibility for doing things like that (Georgia, II-1).

I mean if I stepped up to be a head teacher I would need a lot of help I think. I mean it's not something on my radar. But I think you need that support from someone who has had the experience (Georgia, FG-1).

Even though Georgia highlighted how she was capable of these shared roles and responsibilities she still had a firm belief that she will never have a formal role or title because of the paperwork, delegation involved, and the extra support she would need. She also does not see herself as a leader.

Receiving Recognition to Support Teacher Leadership Development

Another finding that supported teachers' leadership development and leader identity was when they received recognition for their leadership efforts. Two teachers, Lisa and Katrina shared how they enjoyed receiving recognition for leading in certain areas in the centre as it affirmed their leadership potential. For example, Lisa had received positive recognition for the work she had done in leading the centre's bi-cultural programme:

> *The things that make me feel really good is when you get recognised for the work that you're doing. I think a lot of its verbal, with meetings with management, through staff meetings through appraisal systems (Lisa, II-2).*

Katrina found it rewarding and motivating to get positive feedback from her leader, peers and whānau and tamariki when she was leading the children's settling-in process in her room:

> *I had a purpose and like I was doing a good job and being recognised for it. I did feel like I was getting encouraged and praised by other teachers, the leader and also having parents come up and say thank you […] yeah that was like super rewarding and seeing the children happy, that was the most rewarding (Katrina, II-2).*

When Sally was asked about what types of support would a teacher need if they were considering taking on leadership, she valued receiving positive feedback, but also acknowledged how it can be detrimental if the wrong type of support or feedback is given, or worse, none at all:

> *I think they need positive feedback, people need to hear what they are doing well (Sally, FG-I).*

> *If it is not going right and if people are learning to lead or having that opportunity to lead if they come away and their mana isn't in-tact they are not necessarily going to want to get on that horse again and take on that challenge or being open to being a leader (Sally, I-I.)*

In summary, teachers' perceptions of their leader identity seemed to be based on their experiences in observing the leadership of others or leading themselves. Some did not want to be seen or known as the leader but were still happy to contribute to teamwork and lead informally. Receiving recognition and feedback was viewed as an important factor in the development of teachers' leader identity as it appeared to promote a sense of empowerment, and confidence in their own leadership potential.

Empowering Teacher Leadership through Invitation, Encouragement and the Sharing of Roles and Responsibilities

This study found there were specific aspects of practice and knowledge that either encouraged teachers to take on leadership opportunities and responsibilities, or experiences that did not. Five key areas were identified in relation to this finding: first, the importance of leaders tapping into leadership opportunities by utilising teachers' strengths; second, being invited and encouraged into leadership roles; third, the effects of undesired and unwanted leadership roles; fourth, embracing delegated roles and responsibilities, and; lastly, learning leadership on-the-job.

Tapping into Leadership Opportunities Utilising Teachers' Strengths

Georgia, Millie and Lisa acknowledged the importance of a leader knowing each person's strengths and utilising these effectively. Georgia expressed this idea in relation to a leader delegating roles and responsibilities according to her strengths:

> *Knowing your team and where their skills lie. Because we've all got different skills […] So, you can delegate and give people things that play to their strengths. It's nice to play to your strengths, and for those to be acknowledged (Georgia, II-1).*

Millie commented on the importance of knowing the people in your team to better support them:

> *It's like figuring out who everyone is […] you've got to have knowledge about people and that I think is a really strong one, understanding who is in your team. And then figuring out how to best support them in their role (Millie, II-1).*

Lisa suggested that the team's collective strengths can also support the leader within their role of running the centre:

> *Be aware of what the strengths of your teams are, and they can help support you […] so we are a team more than just one person (Lisa, II-2).*

In their focus group interview, Emily and Katrina referred to the team as having a good balance of strengths. Katrina stated:

> *I think we all recognise our own strengths too. We've all got strengths and obviously weaknesses too. We empower each other and bring each other up (Katrina, FG-2).*

Emily also emphasised during the focus group that:

> *I think that our personalities and strengths complement each other, leading as a team (Emily, FG-2).*

In her group discussion, Millie acknowledged how each person's strengths complement the strengths of each other.

> *I mean we've all got so much experience and I think we sort of all feed off each other, But we all know what we are good at and I think we support each other as well (Millie, FG-1).*

When I asked Emily in her individual interview about what she thought of when she heard the word 'leadership' she said a "theory" of a distributed leadership mode that can develop and enhance individuals' strengths and passions:

> *I am thinking about [a]theory to distributed leadership models. That kind of thing where everybody takes on a part of the leadership based on their strength, or their passion or something that they want to grow (Emily, II-2).*

This view concurred with what Emily had also said in the focus group, where she discussed the team's collaborative Matariki (Māori: new year) planning and how each teacher had led in areas based on their teaching strengths:

> *[The Matariki planning] has been quite a good representation of how our strengths and passions show up. For example, Lisa started a big project around Ururangi/Matariki star, […] and she made a huge kite with natural resources with the children […] that incorporated your passions around the natural environment and collecting natural resources and also carpentry and construction (Emily, FG-2).*

While not specifically related to leadership, a collaborative sense of empowerment was acknowledged in both site's philosophy statement:

> *Tamariki, kaiako and whānau can feel at home knowing their physical, emotional, spiritual and social well-being is taken care of (CD-2).*

> *As empowered ākonga/learners […] we believe great learning happens through our shared values of atawhai/kindness and takohanga/responsibility to ourselves & others, places and things (CD-1).*

In summary, these teachers felt that they could be encouraged to take on leadership when a leader notices, embraces and utilises their strengths, interests and passions and promotes everyday teacher leadership by empowering them and other colleagues to contribute and be involved.

Being Invited and Encouraged into Leadership Roles

Five of the teachers had experienced being invited and encouraged to lead, which had led them to take on leadership roles and responsibilities. Georgia and Sally reflected on experiences where they were asked to lead; Georgia with taking on a student and Sally with public speaking at an ECE conference, situations where they felt out of their comfort zones. However, they were given support and encouragement, which resulted in positive outcomes. Georgia shared:

> *I felt really great at the end of it. I mean going into [this leadership responsibility and experience], I was like oh I don't know about this. I have the ability, […] but if I wasn't encouraged I wouldn't have said oh yeah I'll do it. But yeah I was really encouraged and [the head teacher] said you know you'll be really great at this (Georgia, II-1).*

Sally focused on:

> *Getting up at a conference and doing the speaking is really not in my wheelhouse but being given that encouragement and support by not only my boss who was mentoring me but also my colleagues. In the end I was able to do it successfully and I am really proud I did that (Sally, II-1).*

When probed about the types of support given, Sally emphasised the supportive context:

> *It was really just around the encouragement and helping me to develop what I was going to do and giving me certain people that I could go to so I could bounce those ideas off rather than just 'you're on your own' (Sally, II-1).*

Teachers indicated they had enjoyed and preferred being invited and encouraged to lead based on their individual strengths, interests and passions. This was the case for Katrina and Lisa. For example, Katrina had an empowering experience where she was encouraged to share her knowledge and

expertise with student teachers about settling in new children:

> *My boss wanted me to be the head teacher of the under two's, so I felt quite empowered and was able to lead, there were two new students […] so I was teaching them the ropes of how to do that. And I guess settling children into day care was something I felt was one of my strengths (Katrina, II-2).*

Similarly, Lisa reflected on how she was encouraged to support others when she led her colleagues in her interest in bicultural practice:

> *I have been encouraged to lead with certain aspects of the bicultural Te Ao Māori/Māori world, as that has always been an interest and a focus of mine. And to encourage others to learn alongside that (Lisa, II-2).*

Together, the teachers' comments show that being invited and encouraged to lead were empowering experiences for them. The support from their leaders and colleagues, and supportive contexts, contributed to these positive experiences.

Undesired and Unwanted Leadership Roles

Emily and Lisa reflected on negative experiences where they had inherited unwanted leadership roles. The negative effects of having undesired and unwanted leadership roles included feeling that they lacked leadership knowledge and experience. Emily mentioned this in both her individual interview and the focus group:

> *I was thrown into a leadership role really early in my teaching career, before I was even qualified […] I had no idea of what I was doing […] I was trying to take on every possible responsibility and not really delegating anything and not having any direct communication with people saying this is what I need from you (Emily, II-2).*

> *[The management] were just like 'oh you will be a good leader', without equipping me with any tools or skills to do that (Emily, FG-2).*

Similarly, Lisa felt unprepared and unequipped when she was asked to lead early on in her career:

> *I was in my early twenties and I remember […] being asked if I could be the head teacher for a while and I was like 'what?' I felt like, on leadership there are no books to read on it really and*

you are often thrown in the deep end on how to lead a team and I had no experience, and I was terrible (Lisa, II-2)

.

When Lisa was probed with what support she was given, she replied that she was given none at all, which further complicated her experience:

None, there was nothing. [I was] thrown in the deep end of having to try and figure out systems. [It would've been nice to have] somebody to help me develop an understanding of the personalities in the team, the paperwork and the responsibilities (Lisa, II-2).

Other areas of undesired roles were where teachers were required to take on informal leadership roles that made them feel out of their comfort zones. For example, Georgia shared a negative experience when she was asked to speak at a parent hui (Māori; meeting). Public speaking was something she felt uncomfortable doing, especially on a topic she lacked choice in and wasn't passionate about.

I felt really uncomfortable it was sort out of my depth. And we were all told this is what you can talk about. We didn't get to choose what we were sharing […] I mean speaking in a large group first of all makes me shrink and then having a subject that wasn't my passion. […] I mean it went okay but yeah it wasn't a positive experience for me (Georgia, II-1).

In summary, these views indicate teachers' sense that they need to not just be ready to take on leadership roles but also to have leadership knowledge, experience, and be willing to do so.

Being Delegated Roles and Responsibilities

The centre documentation of this study promoted roles and responsibilities where each teaching team were expected to lead through the sharing and delegation of tasks from the leader or to take on specific duties associated with a particular teaching shift. In each focus group, the teachers discussed how they shared, took turns and rotated a range of roles and responsibilities to support the running of their kindergarten/centre. Some of the teachers viewed these duties as opportunities to develop and enhance their leadership skills and practices.

Having a leader who delegates roles and responsibilities was seen as a positive practice by Lisa, Georgia, Emily and Sally. Lisa viewed this practice as an opportunity for individuals to develop their leadership knowledge and skills:

A way a leader can support other people in developing their leadership skills is to spread out any responsibilities they have got so that other people can have a chance to take on those roles to see how they go (Lisa, II-2).

Georgia also acknowledged how delegation promoted teacher capability in relation to the various roles of running the kindergarten:

It's good being given those roles that you wouldn't normally do. Our head teacher has been really good at delegating things like that so that you can step up and if she is away one of us knows what's going on. We're all capable of doing her job; we've all got certain skills (Georgia, II-1).

Emily also viewed the value of all roles and responsibilities being shared as a capability factor. She stated this in the focus group:

Everybody that works here knows pretty much everything about this place and knows how everything works (Emily, FG-2).

In the focus group, Sally commented on the value of delegated roles being slightly challenging and, therefore, opportunities to develop skills:

Delegating them something that you know is going to be a little bit of a challenge for them […] But making sure you are putting the support in around it. So that is a type of way you can grow those people in those roles (Sally, FG-1).

To summarise, this evidence shows how expected and delegated roles and responsibilities can be embraced by teachers if they can and do learn something from them and develop new skills. This process can, in turn, support teachers' leadership development.

Learning Leadership On-The-Job

Although all of the teachers shared examples of learning leadership on-the-job, they either indirectly or directly identified that they viewed learning on-the-job to be an effective way for learning about leadership. This was because they can observe and experience others' leadership practice as well as lead aspects of the programme themselves. For example, Sally, Millie and Lisa indicated the value of knowing what effective leadership looked like by having time to observe and experience it in action. Sally referred to this as having leadership "experience under your belt"

I think a huge part of being a leader and understanding leadership and being able to respect leadership, effective leadership is having lots of experience under your belt. (Sally, II-1).

Millie also commented on building a leadership knowledge base by experiencing the operations and management side of a leadership role, but also knowing where to get support if needed:

Experience would be the big thing, because you need to build your knowledge base, you know all of the administration; you need to have all of that knowledge. [And] knowing where all your support is. You don't necessarily need to know everything you need to know where to find that information (Millie, II-1).

Also related to leadership, Lisa and Sally highlighted the importance of experience with and knowledge in dealing with certain situations or "dramas". Lisa mentioned:

I have had a lot of learning experience with lots of dramas that can happen in ECE […] So, I have got a lot of experience and a lot of knowledge of how to deal with and work with other adults, parents (Lisa, II-2).

Sally referred to these situations as "sticky" ones:

I think you need you need some really good experience like to deal with some sticky situations (Sally, FG-1).

Learning with and alongside leaders in order to see and identify good practice was also viewed as an effective tool to learn about leadership. For example, Katrina commented on the value of having experiences in observing effective leadership practice in-action or hearing about strategies for dealing with people:

Just seeing how [the leader] would deal with situations and how she would deal with other staff and learning from her how to deal with children and all of that. It also comes back to know better strategies of how to cope with parental conflict or something like the difficult conversations that you have to have with parents (Katrina, II-2).

Lisa highlighted how it can be inspiring and motivating to have a leader who demonstrates effective leadership within their own practice.

When you look at the positive aspects, somebody [a leader] who can inspire others with their own practices and their own beliefs I think that is somebody who is really amazing and who encourages you to work to give it your all (Lisa, II-2).

Lisa reiterated this perception with her own leader, Emily, in the focus group:

I feel like you as the leader, like if you want something done in a certain way you just demonstrate it, you do it and that's how we know what to do. (Lisa, FG-2).

Emily agreed and replied with the following:

And then I would hope, because […] for the most part that is how I lead, through action, like showing (Emily, FG-2).

Georgia and Millie shared how their current leader had grown the team's collective skillset by showing and sharing her leadership roles and responsibilities with everyone in the team so that they could take on leadership tasks independently. Georgia related this to teachers being able to "step up":

She is sharing her skills with us so that we are all growing our skills and we can step up when we need to. […] And offering that scaffolding when you need it like when it's the first time you're doing something you need to be walked through it and then next time you can do it yourself (Georgia, II-1).

Millie commented on how opportunities to grow leadership skills enabled teachers to run things smoothly even when the head teacher was absent:

But it grows your skill set too and so it means when she's not here this place will tick along for a long time. She doesn't need to be here. I mean she wasn't here today (Millie, FG-1).

In summary, the sharing of knowledge, skills and expertise from an experienced and effective leader was acknowledged by all teachers as a key attribute to support and promote teachers to take on leadership roles and responsibilities.

Conclusion

Together, the findings of my study, based on the views, perceptions and experiences of ECE teachers, highlight important factors that can influence and impact teachers' understandings of leadership

concepts and practices, and their leader identity. The findings reflect the unknown, ever changing and diverse understandings of leadership in ECE. They reveal the importance of a leader's communication with and collaboration within a team and the potential this has to promote teachers' construction of a leader identity. The findings also highlight how teachers' leader identity can be significantly influenced by prior experiences of leadership. Lastly, they demonstrate how an effective leader who empowers teachers with encouragement and opportunities to lead can encourage teachers to willingly take on leadership roles, thereby supporting the construction of teachers' leader identity. The next chapter will discuss these findings in relation to the existing literature and contributions of my study.

Chapter Five
DISCUSSION

Introduction

The findings of my study illustrate the diverse nature of six ECE teachers' views and perceptions of leadership and their leader identity. My analysis of data from the focus groups, individual interviews and centre documentation shows how teachers' experiences of their own and others' leadership practices significantly influenced how they viewed and understood the concept and practice of leadership, their own perceptions of themselves as teacher leaders, and their ideas, opinions and suggestions about what support ECE teachers need to negotiate and develop their leader identity. Four significant findings are discussed in this chapter: first, leadership as a complex construct for teachers and leaders to understand; second, teachers' mixed perceptions of themselves as leaders; third, relationships as a supportive factor in the construction of teachers' leader identity, and lastly; embracing a teacher leader identity requires support and encouragement. The chapter concludes with a summary of how my study directly addresses the three sub-questions in order to answer the overarching research question.

Leadership as a Complex Construct for Teachers and Leaders to Understand

My study found that teachers' understandings of leadership were complex because they were diverse, and sometimes unclear to teachers themselves. There were a range of factors that attributed to this complex picture of leadership, namely that teachers understood leadership to be multi-faceted, ever evolving and on occasion, involved a misuse of power and control.

Leadership is Multi-faceted in Relation to Contexts and People

Leadership in ECE involves a consideration for the environments and people that differ across settings. As a social construct, leadership has multiple aspects that vary how it can look in practice. In my study, the notion of 'leadership' was viewed in multiple ways; some teachers viewed it as an unknown or as having different "looks", while for others it was a big "question mark" (see Chapter Four, p. 29). These views contributed to teachers' confusion about what leadership in ECE looked like but also how "good" and "bad" experiences of leadership had impacted their understandings of leadership as a concept and practice. Teachers' views about unexpected situations that regularly arose in their ECE settings, and the time involved in developing leadership knowledge and experience, also contributed to the complexity of learning about and understanding leadership.

These views concur with the literature in that there is no one clear definition of leadership in education, including in ECE. Research-based understandings of the concept and practices of educational leadership in ECE have only recently begun to develop, but these range in complexity and sometimes lack clarity (Cooper, 2014; Klevering & McNae 2018; Thornton, 2019; Thornton et al., 2009). Furthermore, leadership in ECE has a low-profile compared to the schooling sector and has endured a lack of acknowledgement and engagement for more than a decade (Rodd, 2006, 2013; Thornton, 2019). In addition to these ideas, the teachers in my study revealed mixed views about leadership practice being based on either 'good' or 'bad' experiences. This finding and their shared lack of clarity regarding leadership can result in teachers being unclear about their potential role as a teacher leader, unless they have a 'good' leader to model off.

This issue has been addressed in part by ECE scholars (Rodd 2013; Thornton et al., 2009), who suggest a framework where leadership is viewed as fluid and not prescribed. This idea raises the question of whether there can only be one clear definition of educational leadership or one framework for ECE. The findings in my study reveal that teachers' understanding of the word 'leadership' can be multi-faceted and difficult to grasp when it is socially and contextually constructed from teachers' experiences and defies one 'look' or manifestation. Klevering and McNae (2018) affirm that complexities of leadership in ECE are influenced by the broad and varied social landscapes of people and education settings. Waniganayake et al. (2017) also acknowledge leadership as being socially and contextually constructed, highlighting how leadership is shaped by settings and the people in them. Similarly, teachers in my study viewed leadership as an unclear, unknown, unexpected and unpredictable construct. This finding suggests that a 'one size fits all' definition of leadership may not be ideal because of the complexities involved in accounting for multiple influences from different people and settings. Responding to this complexity by endorsing a set, prescribed framework could potentially be challenging and problematic for teachers and even leaders as they continue to grapple with their understandings and enactment of leadership in practice.

Leadership as Ever Evolving

Teachers in my study also viewed leadership as ever changing and ever evolving and believed that you learn about leadership as you go along. Teachers' current views of leadership stemmed from their observations and experiences of leadership overtime. This meant teachers' understandings of leadership had been enhanced and developed from hands-on experiences and their observations of other peoples' leadership practices in their current or previous workplace. Sometimes they began teaching with minimal understandings if they did not have any knowledge of leadership in ECE at the time. This idea of leadership as ever-evolving was in reference to teachers' understandings and practices of leadership that were added to and adapted as they went, who they went with, and where they went.

Although there is a dearth of research literature available about leadership as an ever-evolving construct, what is available aligns with my study. For example, Mettiainen's (2016) study highlights understandings of leadership as being similar to an ebb and flow with no beginning or end, developing and evolving in relation to influences from experiences overtime with contexts and people. Similarly, Davis et al. (2015) suggest leadership being like a dance that is ongoing, stopping, starting and adapting as needed. These ideas resonate strongly with my study, where teachers reflected on how their understandings of leadership had continued to develop and were enhanced by the people and the places they had experienced. In addition, other research literature around this topic has acknowledged how the environment and the people can influence leadership approaches. Rodd (2013) explains that leadership is underpinned by a sociocultural theory where leadership can be conceptualised as a social construction and understandings of it evolve and are validated through collaboration. Rodd's idea suggests that the teachers in my study brought with them their own views and perceptions based on the experiences they'd had of others and their own leadership practices. This idea concurs with Sims et al. (2018) who also discuss leadership as being ever evolving and influenced by both social and political contexts. Georgia, a teacher in my study, referred to external impacts on leadership. She reflected on how political changes have influenced leadership styles and approaches overtime (see Chapter Four, p. 31). My study, therefore, contributes knowledge about teacher leadership in ECE as a unique and personal journey and leadership as a sociocultural construct that is forever changing and evolving in relation to experience.

Leadership as a Misuse of Power and Control

My study illuminated teachers' views that leadership can involve the misuse of power and control. This was evident when teachers spoke about leaders with a formal (designated) position who used their role to control colleagues through micro-managing and controlling how things are done. This controlling leadership approach was believed to hinder two-way communication as colleagues were told what to do rather than encouraged to work together through a more collaborative approach. My study also revealed how these experiences had negatively influenced teachers' feelings and views toward formal leadership, leading to a lack of desire and motivation towards their own practice and, in turn, a detrimental effect on teachers not wanting to be a leader themselves. Overall, it was concluded that experiences of a controlling leadership approach stifled some teachers' willingness regarding enactment of teacher leadership and negatively influenced their construction of a leader identity.

This finding concurs with the existing research literature on hierarchical leadership. Traditional views of leadership have tended to focus on the position, title and characteristics of a leader, and power and control residing in an individual, rather than the practice/s of leadership in a supportive, collaborative

context. Consistent with a sociocultural theoretical perspective, Douglass (2018) refers to leadership as a relational construct, which is enacted, as a collective, shared, and distributed practice within a team. Leadership is something people are and do, rather than a job title, and it can be enacted by all teachers whether in formal or informal roles. One concern of an approach that focuses on the position and title of leadership in ECE is evident in Grarock and Morrissey's (2013) study, which highlights that when a traditional and hierarchical model of leadership is dominant in the centre, teacher leadership is enacted by individual teachers within their own rooms rather than is shared and transferred across the centre, unless teachers hold a formal leadership title. Grarock and Morrissey (2013) also suggest how traditional views of leadership that focus only on a formal position and title, rather than informal leadership practices, can inhibit teachers' willingness to enact leadership in collaborative ways. Teachers in my study enjoyed leaders who embraced a collective and shared leadership approach. They shared negative experiences of 'top down' controlling leadership styles that hindered the development of their own leader identity through not being able to contribute, a fear of doing something the wrong way, or feeling that they were not good enough. My study also emphasised teachers' view that leaders can also misuse the power that comes with a positional title. This issue is evident in Brooker and Cumming's (2019) study about the 'dark side of leadership' where leaders use methods such as coercion and emotional blackmail with colleagues, with negative consequences for the team. Teachers in my study experienced 'dark leadership', specifically through leaders' actions of 'cutting teachers down to size' and 'bosses who looked down at them' and 'feeling that they had to impress them'. These experiences appeared to contribute, at times, to a toxic environment where morale was low and a there was a lack of productivity, resulting in detrimental effects on teaching and learning (see Chapter Four, p. 33).

In summary, the findings discussed in this section raise a question about whether leadership being open to interpretation is a good thing. Perhaps it is and needs to be, given the teachers' diverse and varied experiences shared in this study. A prescribed approach to leadership may not suit all teachers, leaders, settings, and situations. Teachers' diverse views of the concept of 'leadership' reflected their past and present experiences. Leadership was seen as being ever evolving, unknown and unexpected and certain approaches can have negative experiences for teachers' practice. These understandings of leadership, in turn, can be seen as major influences on a teacher's construction of their leader identity, or how they perceive themselves as a leader.

Teachers' Mixed Perceptions of Themselves as Leaders

Teachers in my study had mixed perceptions of their own leader identity, especially in terms of whether they viewed themselves as leaders or not, whether they welcomed or actively sought leadership opportunities and for some, the influences of their own experiences as a formal leader. This finding is

discussed in relation to two aspects: teachers' self-perceptions as informal leaders; and receiving recognition to support their leader identity.

Teachers' Self-perceptions as Informal Leaders

My study revealed an insightful finding based on teachers' self-perceptions of leading 'informally', whereby teachers preferred to construct an informal, rather than a formal leader identity. Some of the teachers readily identified themselves in informal leadership roles because it seemed they still wanted to be seen as part of the teaching team, rather than separate from the team with extra responsibilities that a formal leadership role would bring.

This finding supports points made in the literature on teacher leadership that highlights the value and importance of everyday teacher leadership as a beneficial practice for developing a teacher leader identity (Cooper, 2020). This notion is where teachers actively lead and contribute to shared goals in their day-to-day practices. However, the literature also reveals that many teachers do not identify themselves as everyday teacher leaders (Cooper, 2014, 2018, 2020; Sinha & Hanuscin, 2017), especially if they have experienced controlling leadership from others (Cooper, 2018). On the contrary, my study identified that five out of the six participants did perceive themselves as teacher leaders, even without a formal leadership position. These teachers shared how this positive perception had stemmed from when their current or previous leaders modelled a collaborative, shared and distributed approach. Teachers' recognition of their own leadership potential builds on Sinha and Hanuscin's (2017) study where teachers may perceive themselves as teacher leaders in a range of ways, but how an intersection can occur when they see themselves as leaders based on how they define leadership or the leadership activities they do. Similarly, the teachers in my study viewed their everyday activities, roles and responsibilities as contributions to the leading and running of the centre/kindergarten, which led them to view themselves as 'informal' teacher leaders. These ideas suggest that the quality of teachers' experiences of leadership, their own or the practice of others, makes a difference to how they perceive themselves as leaders, revealing a knowledge contribution of my study, especially as there is currently scant literature in this area.

The teachers in my study felt fortunate to have leaders who encouraged and invited them to lead, gave them roles and responsibilities, and practised effective collaboration and communication skills. Similarly, Cooper's (2018) study reveals how teachers felt empowered when they were given opportunities to lead through drawing on their unique skills and knowledge amongst the team. In both cases, equal relationships with leaders' willingness to provide teachers with opportunities to lead assisted teachers to feel empowered in the informal role of teacher leader. Contributing to the literature, my study highlights how teachers can become aware of how developing their own leadership skills and

approaches supports the construction of their own leader identity. However, the idea that teachers can lead amongst the team by drawing on their own skills and knowledge may challenge their own and other teachers' understanding of an 'everyday teacher leader', thereby blurring the roles between an informal and formal leader. Consideration may need to be given to rethinking how leadership practices are understood, viewed, and labelled.

One of the teachers in my study shared that she had no desire to lead, but she did in fact, lead informally on an everyday basis. However, she didn't see it as leadership because she didn't view 'informal' leadership roles and responsibilities as constituting leadership practice. This misunderstanding of leadership aligns with Collay's (2011) research in schools which emphasises that leadership, and understandings of it, are not something that came easily to many teachers, and that teachers need help in recognising that the things they do in the classroom can be leadership practices. Relating Collay's idea to my study, it is important to note that only one teacher in my study has this perception, perhaps due to ECE being a collaborative and collective environment, where leadership roles and responsibilities can be and are commonly shared between teachers and formal leaders (Cooper, 2018). This situation may differ in a traditional school classroom context where teachers have traditionally taught on their own. The concern that some teachers may not recognise their own practice as leadership, as highlighted in my study, emphasises the need for teachers and leaders to consider the diverse range of informal leadership practices that are possible in order for all teachers to embrace leadership as part of their everyday practice. Such details can also assist teachers to address the Teaching Council's expectations for certification, which expects teachers to engage in and evidence leadership in their day-to-day practice.

Receiving Recognition to Support Leader Identity

All teachers felt valued and appreciated when their leadership roles and responsibilities were recognised through acknowledgement and praise from their leaders and colleagues. My study revealed how this supportive situation had encouraged and empowered teachers to develop and enhance these roles and responsibilities, resulting in teachers' negotiating and progressing the construction of their leader identity, enhancing their leadership knowledge and practice. Heikka et al. (2018) state that recognition of teacher leadership is important in enabling ECE teachers to feel comfortable in providing each other with guidance or mentoring, especially in relation to enacting pedagogical responsibilities across the centre. In my study, leadership as pedagogical responsibilities were actioned by all teachers when they led their team in certain areas based on their knowledge, expertise and passion, for example, Millie's leadership in the Enviroschools programme. Millie was driven and felt comfortable to lead this aspect of practice with support and recognition from her leader. Other examples in my study involved teachers feeling valued and appreciated when they received feedback

for areas they had been asked to lead in and had been given support for this.

In terms of leader identity, being recognised as a leader was empowering for the teachers in my study. Sinha and Hanuscin (2017) recognise the significance of positive experiences where teachers' leadership capabilities were affirmed from colleagues' feedback, which increased teachers' confidence and a sense of themselves as informal leaders. Sinha and Hanuscin (2017) conclude how the views of colleagues and others can influence teachers' self-consciousness and personal growth as a significant factor in leader identity development. The ECE literature emphasises the importance of a supportive environment to enable the construction of teachers' leader identity. Cooper (2018) reveals how teachers gain a sense of empowerment when they are supported by formal leaders to engage in collegial experiences as a team through openly expressing and sharing their ideas and expertise and leading relational dialogues. Teachers in my study acknowledged and praised each other's strengths and skills in the focus groups, similar to relational dialogue (see Chapter four, p. 44). This collegial recognition and support encouraged teachers to identify the areas in which they led and supported others. This finding emphasises the importance of experienced leaders creating supportive conditions and opportunities to invite and support teachers to take on leadership activity in relation to what they do every day in order to enact teacher leadership and embrace a leader identity.

Relationships as a Supportive Factor in the Development of Teachers' Leader Identity

Consistent with the sociocultural theoretical lens that underpins my study, all teachers recognised that leader identity can be fostered through positive and professional relationships with their leaders and team members. This finding highlights the influence that socially constructed ECE environments have on the ways teachers negotiate and foster their leader identity. Two practices supportive of teachers' leader identity were identified: embracing trust, respect, and demonstrating kindness and care; and collaboration as an inclusive practice.

Embracing Trust and Respect and Demonstrating Kindness and Care

My study revealed the value and importance of open and honest communication in promoting teacher leadership. Teachers felt relationships based on trust and respect were paramount to developing their leader identity and willingness to embrace leadership roles and responsibilities. Teachers' negative experiences of leaders who did not regularly communicate and collaborate and were controlling were seen as detrimental to the relationships across the team and to teachers' attitudes towards leadership. For example, (see Chapter Four, pp. 38-39) one teacher shared a situation where the team's morale was low, and teachers felt like they were going nowhere because of a lack of a shared vision and direction. This situation resulted in a lack of trust and respect and feeling undervalued, and in turn, a lack of motivation to step up. This example highlights how negative leadership experiences not only influence

relationships but also teachers' understandings and views of leadership and leader identity.

Relational trust is an essential condition for the emergence of teacher leadership. Bryk and Schneider's (2003) notion of relational trust supports and enhances the roles and relationships between all those in a school community, including the leaders, resulting in positive influences school reforms. Similarly, Thornton and Cherrington's (2014) study reveals that relational trust in an ECE context is an important aspect of leadership as it encourages collaborative enquiry but also provides a safe place to challenge practice. This notion is viewed as a value that formal leaders establish and promote to effectively engage in collaborative enquiry and challenge teachers' practice as a team.

Building on Thornton and Cherrington's (2014) point, the teachers in my study acknowledged trusting and respectful relationships with their colleagues as a way to support their developing leader identity. They also identified the need for formal leaders to encourage safe environments, one in which all team members were trusted to have a say and contribute their ideas. For some teachers, their experience of a 'safe' environment had led them to embrace leadership roles and responsibilities in their current centres. This positive engagement in leadership practices signifies the need for formal leaders to foster trust and respect as centre-wide conditions that can empower and inspire teachers to develop and enhance their leader identity. For this practice to be embraced, formal leaders need to appreciate the value of promoting positive and professional relationships while developing and enhancing their own relational skills and experience and ensuring teachers have access to similar opportunities.

Teachers in my study appreciated leaders who demonstrated kindness and care through understanding and empathising with others. Teachers felt that these kindness and care practices from a leader and amongst the team promoted a sense of belonging and aroha (Māori: love and care) for them. This finding suggests the need for teachers' well-being to be considered and respected by their leaders and colleagues. The literature refers to Hare (2006) suggestion of open-mindedness as a way to establish and maintain positive and professional relationships while being open to each other's views, opinions, and ideas in a non-judgmental way. These ideas of Hare's (2006) help explain the views of teachers in my study, where they believed that kindness and care nourished open-mindedness and where individuals' values and feelings were acknowledged and considered. Empathising and being open to others' ideas and values can help develop trust and respect amongst teachers and leaders and support teachers' sense of belonging as contributing members of their team. More specifically, Bøe and Hognestad (2016) acknowledge the importance of not overlooking the everyday staff leadership practices of care and consideration, which can involve humour, chatting, being caring, and supporting as intentional leadership practices. In my study, these practices were evident in teachers' positive and professional interactions that I observed in the focus group interviews where there was laughter, casual

chatting, enjoyment, and care and recognition of each other's expertise. Relationships that are based on trust, respect, kindness and care can therefore positively influence teachers' willingness to embrace everyday leadership practices of care and a leader identity.

Collaboration as an Inclusive Practice

The idea of leaders fostering a collaborative environment, where everyone was encouraged to contribute, was seen to empower all teachers through having a voice and a sense of belonging. In contrast, some of the teachers' negative experiences were about leaders who had a controlling manner and made all the decisions on teachers' behalf without consulting or collaborating with them.

From a sociocultural lens, the concept of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) embraces collaboration as a collective process amongst a team of people and can be applied to leadership. One purpose of this collaboration is to include everyone in the group as when making decisions and also unpacking and reflecting on positive and negative aspects of practice, which can sometimes result in conflicting views and opinions. All of the teachers in my study highlighted the importance of collaborating with one another and making decisions in an environment where they felt safe to do so. They noted that not working collaboratively as a team or a 'community of practice' stifled their own productivity and the team's goals. However, ineffective leadership practice, which teachers described as a lack of positive and professional communication, collaboration, and shared contributions, did not support teachers' sense of belonging or a culture of shared roles. Therefore, teachers did not always have positive opportunities to lead and develop their leader identity.

The value of collaboration was emphasised by Sinha and Hanuscin (2017), where their participants used discussions productively to reflect on their challenges and successes within developing leadership practices. The authors suggest that discussions amongst teachers about what it means to be a leader can help teachers develop their leadership views, practices, and leader identity. They conclude that self-consciousness of personal growth is a significant factor in leader identity development. Thornton and Cherrington (2014) outline the importance of professional learning communities, where teachers learn and develop collaboratively, and that collaborative practices are interrelated with leadership. Similarly, Ryder et al.'s (2017) study highlight how teachers and leaders can grow and develop effectively and positively through a collective and collaborative approach.

Teachers resonated with this idea in the focus groups where they collaboratively reflected on how well they worked as a team. However, teachers also reflected on past challenges where they felt their leaders had not supported them to lead effectively. This tension builds on what Cooper (2018) found, where teachers in her study faced similar tensions in leading their colleagues and needed the support of their

formal leaders to keep things moving. These shared experiences suggest that teachers may need formal leaders to support their enactment of leadership and leadership development by stepping in and supporting them during collaborative learning. Another consideration is that while both settings of this study supported professional and respectful relationships amongst their teams, they could do this in a safe environment. Still there might be possible tensions and complexities for teams who may do not have a positive and professional culture. It seems clear though, that positive relationships that foster collaborative and inclusive practices not only embrace the sociocultural underpinnings of leadership in ECE, but also assist in supporting teachers' self-perception as leaders alongside other leaders.

Enabling an inclusive and collaborative approach requires a culture of trust and respect with a team alongside open mindedness. Even more importantly, as revealed in this study, kindness and care are also important leadership actions. Practising kindness and care entails deep and meaningful considerations toward others, which adds further complexity to the dynamics of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships with others. This supportive context can empower everyone to feel that they are a valued team member, can potentially embrace leadership roles and responsibilities, and develop their leader identity.

Embracing a Teacher Leader Role with Support and Encouragement

Leadership development goes hand in hand with leader identity. As teachers develop their leadership knowledge, skills and practice, they also begin to develop a leader identity, so these two notions can work together simultaneously (Cooper, 2018). There was range of factors identified in my study that either promoted and encouraged or stifled and hindered the development of teacher leadership. These factors centred on two key influences: delegated roles and responsibilities to support teacher leadership development; and on-the-job experiences to support teacher leadership.

Delegated Roles and Responsibilities to Support Teacher Leadership Development

The teachers in my study viewed delegated roles and responsibilities as opportunities to develop and enhance their leadership skills and practices. These consisted of pedagogical roles and responsibilities based on curriculum objectives, teaching and learning and administrative tasks and duties. The findings in Clarkin-Phillips (2011) study reveal how collaborative and collegial learning is supported through the distribution and sharing of roles and responsibilities, similar to Wenger's (1998) community of practice ideas, but also how such opportunities support the development of teacher leadership confidence and capabilities. In addition to these ideas, the teachers in my study believed learning about these roles and tasks was useful so when staff, particularly when the leader was absent, others in the team could carry out all the necessary tasks and duties, also enabling a sense of capability and competence. Being delegated pedagogical roles and responsibilities also promoted the acquisition of

new knowledge and skills. Together, these roles and tasks contributed to teachers' leadership development where informal leaders could grow their leadership capabilities. An example of this in practice refers to the literature known as distributive pedagogical leadership (DPL). Heikka et al.'s (2019) study identify how sufficient implementation of DPL has strong links to teachers' commitment to pedagogical leadership. Distributing responsibilities was one of the dimensions that ranked high as commitment level of DPL, which coincides with some of the teachers' views in my study where they enjoyed roles and responsibilities being delegated.

Some of the more confident and experienced teachers in my study shared their willingness to take on leadership delegated to them. Still, in addition to this, they also showed a preference to step up and lead based on their strengths and interests, without delegation or distribution of tasks from others. This idea can be understood by Rodd's (2013) description of distributed leadership in ECE, where teachers will step up and volunteer when things need to be done as a collective responsibility. Grarock and Morrissey's (2013) study also reveals how teachers often demonstrate leadership from their own personal expertise. In relation to pedagogical leadership, Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003) argue that having many leaders in a team with specified domains of expertise and experience can support pedagogical leadership to be distributed in a way that considers teachers' strengths and interests. The idea of teachers stepping up, volunteering, and initiating leadership roles and responsibilities differs from leadership that is delegated, invited and encouraged. To promote purposeful and meaningful leadership experiences, formal leaders would need to acknowledge and embrace teachers' strengths, interests and passions, so teachers feel valued and potentially initiate and enact leadership on their own accord.

Another aspect of this finding is how teachers felt supported when the leader who delegated these roles supported and guided them to carry them out successfully, which cannot always be guaranteed. Bøe and Hognestad's (2017) study acknowledges the complexities of leadership within a DPL approach as there are so many ways of enacting this role as a formal leader including the pressure of completing all of the other 'tasks and duties'. Teachers in my study also shared negative experiences where they did not have opportunities to take on leadership roles because of a controlling leader who did not share roles and responsibilities. Having leaders who would not let go of the reins was highlighted in Cooper's (2018) study where a teacher was hesitant to associate herself with leadership activity because of her experience of a commanding and controlling leader. Letting go of the reins and delegating tasks and duties with support and guidance places a significant focus on formal leaders, creating opportunities for informal leaders to engage in positive, effective, and supportive leadership enactment. It is also important for teachers and leaders to have knowledge and experience of the enactment of collected, shared or distributed leadership (Douglass, 2018). This collegial and collective approach between

teachers and leaders demonstrates actions and practices consistent with a sociocultural theoretical perspective of leadership.

On-the-job Experiences to Support Teacher Leadership

Teachers in my study found learning leadership on-the-job was invaluable as they had opportunities to observe and engage in practices with the support of role modelling and scaffolding from formal leaders. Learning on-the-job was viewed as purposeful as it was relevant to the teachers' respective context and the people within it. One value was the importance of having a leader who could role model and demonstrate a range of effective practices. The teachers in my study valued having opportunities to observe effective practice, for example, hearing difficult conversations, dealing with conflict and coping with stressful situations with parents/teachers. They also valued reflecting on their own practice with a mentor to guide and scaffold them. Rouse (2015) views mentoring as a leadership and a reflective practice to gain fresh perspectives. Reflection in, and on action supports learning on-the-job as teachers are encouraged to consider their roles in practical and relevant situations. A mentor and support leader, in this case, would need to be with the children and colleagues to support a teacher 'in action'. This preference for learning on-the-job seemed to stem from another issue. Most of the teachers had felt unprepared and unequipped when they were initially given unwanted leadership roles and responsibilities. When they were in these situations, they sometimes felt they lacked 'hands on' support from experienced formal leaders (see Chapter Four, p. 46). These issues raise questions about ECE teachers' leadership preparation.

There is some educational research on leader identity preparation and its impact on teacher leadership development, but this is mostly relevant to schools and universities. Research on this topic in ECE is scarce. Carver's (2016) school-based study indicates leader identity transformation as an important component of teacher leadership development in school settings. Wenner and Campbell (2017) reveal an increased interest in teacher leadership as a key component of education reformation. They also suggested a focus on how teacher leadership is enacted. However, York-Barr and Duke (2004) years earlier acknowledged how teacher leadership development is a complex phenomenon in schools. These ideas raise the dilemma of whether teachers can be prepared to lead effectively and, if so, in what ways and with what support. Wenner and Campbell (2017) also highlight the limited preparation support for teacher leaders, although they explain that leadership professional learning is mostly done separately to the contexts of teacher leaders. This type of professional learning was in contrast with the teachers' preferences in my study as they wanted to experience leadership in a 'hands-on' way.

My study highlighted how teachers' leadership experiences were varied depending on the people or the setting, suggesting a need for unique leadership preparation. Sinha and Hanuscin's (2017) model of

teacher leadership development (from teacher, to teacher leader) recognised that individual teachers pursued different pathways in their experiences, priorities and contexts, suggesting that teachers' leadership journeys are unique. My study suggests it might be more relevant for teachers to learn leadership practice on-the-job, with support and guidance where it is in context, with experienced colleagues and leaders that teacher leaders will be involved with. Teachers' preference to learn on-the-job in my study was supported by their formal leaders who embraced effective leadership modelling, but this cannot be guaranteed in all settings. Learning about leadership through experience on-the-job appears to be one way of developing teacher leadership, but there also needs to be a consideration of learning leadership content knowledge, which may come from external support for teachers and leaders.

In summary, being delegated, invited and encouraged to lead as well as having opportunities of learning leadership on-the-job through hands-on experiences and observations positively influenced teachers' view of themselves as a leader and having a desire and motivation to take on leadership roles and responsibilities.

Addressing the Research Questions

My study was carried out to explore and address the overarching question of: *What are teachers' views, perceptions and experiences of educational leadership and leader identity?* The discussion of the findings in this chapter has highlighted the complex notion of educational leadership and leader identity in ECE for teachers and leaders. Furthermore, it has revealed how teachers' experiences, both past and present, and opportunities to lead, influence and impact their knowledge and understandings of leadership and the development of their own leader identity. These experiences are influenced by the relationships and interactions teachers have with others, consistent with the sociocultural theoretical lens that underpins this study.

Three sub-questions were developed from the literature review (Chapter Two, p. 20) to help address the over-arching question. Informed by this Discussion chapter, responses to these questions are summarised below.

What are ECE teachers' views around the types of leadership practice they have experienced?

The findings demonstrate that teachers hold complex views of leadership that are based upon their personal experiences of leadership while teaching in ECE. These experiences consist of interactions and observations with a range of people, including formal leaders and settings, and reflect each teacher's unique leadership journey. This journey was also found to be one that develops and evolves overtime and one that is indeed developing in teachers' present environment as they grapple with their

own place and space as a teacher leader. Both positive and negative leadership experiences can influence teachers' views and perceptions of leadership and being a leader. For example, leadership was viewed as being "up and down", a "hit and miss" and "good and bad". Views of ineffective leadership include a lack of communication and collaboration and controlling personalities of leaders who used a top down approach to manage teachers and tell them what to do.

What are ECE teachers' perceptions of themselves as leaders?

Teachers in my study had positive views of themselves as teacher leaders and recognised that some of their everyday teacher roles and responsibilities constituted the enactment of leadership. Their views and perceptions suggested they had subconsciously identified their teacher leadership practices as 'informal' leadership, but not explicitly articulated it as such. This perception of themselves as 'informal' leaders was nurtured and supported by formal leaders who practised effective leadership when delegating, inviting and encouraging teachers in supportive ways to take on leadership roles and responsibilities while embracing everyone as a valued part of the team. The latter was done through the establishment of positive and professional relationships built on trust and respect, kindness and care in a collaborative and inclusive environment. These findings suggest that for teachers to have positive perceptions about themselves as leaders, they need an environment with effective leaders who embrace and foster a collaborative and collective space where the leadership is respectfully shared and distributed amongst willing teachers and also teachers' enactment of leadership is recognised, acknowledged, and appreciated.

What knowledge and experience might support ECE teachers to negotiate and develop their own leader identity?

My study indicates how formal leaders can play a pivotal role in setting the scene for teachers to see themselves as leaders and to understand effective leadership through positive experiences. These experiences can involve encouragement and opportunities for teachers to enact everyday leadership. To encourage and promote leadership in a team-based environment, a leader can delegate roles and responsibilities in ways that are appealing to teachers who are open to learning. They can also invite and encourage teachers to lead from their own strengths, interests and passions, and ensure teachers are given relevant, on-the-job leadership support. Teachers valued support such as scaffolding, role modelling, and mentoring when they were taking on responsibilities and enacting leadership on-the-job. Teachers viewed these hands on 'learning on-the-job' experiences as invaluable and transformational in constructing their leader identity. It was noted that learning on-the-job, in practice, is more desirable than relying only on set and prescribed leadership frameworks, as it is meaningful and purposeful for teachers.

In the final chapter of this study, a summary of the key findings is presented, followed by implications

for leadership practice and teacher leader identity, considerations for leadership policy, limitations of the study, and recommendations for further research.

Chapter Six
CONCLUSION

My study investigated ECE teachers' understandings, views and perceptions of leadership practice and leader identity. My study aimed to respond to gaps in the research literature in relation to teacher leadership and leader identity in ECE. This involved seeking teachers' diverse, complex views and understandings of leadership in ECE, including perceptions of themselves as leaders and identifying what knowledge and experience might support teachers to develop a leader identity. A qualitative, descriptive and interpretive research design was adopted to encourage teachers to share these views and experiences. Six teachers, including four with positional leadership experiences, from across two unique early childhood services shared their experiences, understandings, views and perceptions during focus groups and semi-structured individual interviews. Data collection was supported by analysis of relevant centre documentation. The underpinning research question of this study was: *What are teachers' views, perceptions and experiences of educational leadership and leader identity?* This chapter begins with a summary of the key findings and the significance of my study, followed by implications for leadership practice and teacher leader identity, considerations for policy, limitations, and recommendations for further research. Underpinned by a sociocultural theory, my study has argued that teachers' construction of a leader identity and their enactment of leadership practice are socially constructed through their experiences of people and the settings they teach in.

Key Findings and Significance of the Study

An inductive, interpretive thematic analysis revealed four key findings. First, leadership was deemed a complex construct for teachers and leaders to understand. Views of leadership knowledge and understanding were diverse, multi-faceted and ever evolving as they were influenced by teachers' past and present experiences with a range of different people and contexts. Teachers felt that the concept of leadership was unclear and unknown due to the variety of approaches and styles they had experienced, both positive and negative. This raised the importance of teachers acquiring experiences of 'good' effective leadership to assist them in grappling with their own leader identity in practice. Teachers' negative leadership observations and experiences, where formal leaders misused their power and control through micro-managing teachers and creating toxic environments, hindered teachers to develop their leader identity and emerge as teacher leaders.

Second, the teachers had positive perceptions of themselves as leaders. Although these perceptions were mixed, it was evident that with the right support and encouragement they enjoyed leading in areas of strengths, interests and passion. Interestingly, teachers had formed perceptions of themselves as leading 'informally' and preferred to lead in this comfortable and safe way without having an official

title or overall responsibility. Having supportive positional leaders and colleagues influenced some teachers to feel positive about embracing a leader identity, but again, without a formal title. Having their leadership activities and accomplishments recognised by colleagues and formal leaders led teachers to see themselves leading effectively, strengthening their leadership capabilities and development of a leader identity.

Third, positive and professional relationships were viewed as significant factors in supporting leader identity. The notion of leader identity encompassed relational practices and strategies that support leader identity. A trusting, respectful and collaborative approach influences a team environment where everyone gets to have a say, but also where leadership roles and responsibilities are shared. Previously mentioned leaders who misused their power and control by not promoting a collective and shared approach did not give teachers the opportunities to develop and enhance their leadership practices collaboratively.

Fourth, hands-on, real-life and in action experiences working alongside an experienced and effective leader was highlighted as a key attribute for individuals to develop and enhance their leader identity. My study found certain types of practices that encouraged and promoted the construction of teachers' leader identity and others that do not. Both settings included leaders who encouraged teachers to experience a range of roles and responsibilities. This was done through the sharing and respectful delegation of roles and responsibilities, which the teachers embraced, and inviting and encouraging teachers to lead in areas based on their own strengths, interests and passions. In contrast, teachers reflected on negative experiences where they were given unwanted leadership roles due to feeling out of their depth and having no support or experience. These experiences led to some teacher's hesitancy to take on similar roles and responsibilities in the future. One way around this lack of experience and readiness was 'learning on-the-job'. For teachers, this was a preferred way of developing their own leader identity and leadership knowledge, skills, and practice.

With these findings in mind, the significance of my study is that it addresses a research gap in how teachers' leadership understandings and leader identities develop, and change based on their personal and professional experiences. It is, however, important to recognise that teachers' experiences will differ from one context to another and that a teacher's leadership practice and identity evolves over time. This is a significant factor to consider for all teachers, everyday teacher leaders and formal leaders. My study shows that teachers often lead with what they have seen, and this knowledge and experience can be positive and/or negative. This was clearly evident from the teachers' responses in how their experiences of both good and bad leadership had informed their knowledge and understandings of leadership and their development as a teacher leader. Given that leadership is

socially constructed in relation to people and environment, my study provides evidence for teacher leadership learning and development to be 'in house', even if in part, so that it can be directly applied to teachers' practice, and be appropriate for, and meaningful to the context. Furthermore, rather than be guided only by set fixed ideas of leadership, what this study has revealed are specific strategies and practices that may promote and support teachers to see themselves as leaders and be willing to take on leadership activity as part of their everyday practice. This can be through formal leaders' encouragement, invitation and thoughtful delegation.

Implications for Teacher Leadership Practice and Teacher Leader Identity

Understanding leadership practice and leader identity is an essential aspect of teaching and leading in ECE. When the teachers in my study were given time to think about the influences on their views of leadership and leader identity, these were based on their very own 'lived' experiences of leadership and leader identity, both positive and negative. Recognition of the effects of negative leadership experiences raises the need for knowledge and support to be given to all leaders and teachers in ECE. My study shows that it is possible for teachers to come into ECE with views of leadership shaped by negative experiences, therefore, to support teacher leadership development, it is important to have opportunities to explore these experiences and to ensure teachers have access to more positive experiences so that they can observe effective leadership in practice. This can involve learning on-the-job alongside formal leaders who create opportunities for teachers to enact leadership activity with encouragement and support. Therefore, teachers require formal leaders who can not only model effective leadership practices and experiences but are also given leadership support from their organisations.

Implications for Leadership Policy

The Education Council of NZ (now known as the Teaching Council of Aotearoa NZ) has recently developed frameworks and strategies titled the *Leadership Strategy for the Teaching Profession* (2018a) and the *Educational Leadership Capability Framework* (2018b), as well as the *Code of Professional Responsibility and Standards for the Teaching Profession* (2017). The generalistic nature of these being applicable to the whole sector, including but not specific to ECE seems insufficient in relation to supporting ECE teachers and leaders, given the diverse and unique context of ECE settings. My study highlights that more support is needed to understand what leadership means in relation to teachers' everyday practice. My study also highlights the importance of recognising implications for leader identity, which is currently not mentioned in the Leadership Strategy. Instead, this strategy places emphasis on the practices and the role of leadership with little regard for how it can be influenced by people and settings. Emphasising leader identity in leadership policy documentation is needed as the development of leader identity, and ways it develops overtime, were identified as

significant factors in enabling teachers to see themselves as leaders and to enact teacher leadership, strongly influenced by the people and settings teachers experience.

Limitations of the Study

Conducive to obtaining in-depth descriptions of some teachers' understandings, views and perceptions, my study was limited to six teachers from two early childhood services. As a qualitative research design, with a small participant sample, it is not possible to generalise the findings to the wider population. Also, my study only focuses on two types of ECE environments, kindergartens and education and care centres, and not the whole spectrum of services available. In both cases however teachers and leaders can still reflect and consider the findings in relation to their own experiences and contexts.

Recommendations for Further Research

My study has responded to gaps in the research by exploring the complex and diverse notion of leadership and leader identity in relation to teachers in ECE. As an area that is fairly under researched, findings in my study identified a number of opportunities that could be further explored through research. Research could further explore teachers' preference to lead informally, rather than in a formal role with a title. Learning through on-the-job experiences alongside effective leaders, was a significant influence on teachers' willingness to learn leadership practice. Inquiry into how this practice occurs in different ECE settings could be an area for further research. Another possibility could be research on how formal leaders are supported to negotiate the implementation of a range of effective leadership strategies, including those identified in my study, such as thoughtful delegation of roles, and inviting and encouraging teachers to lead.

Appendices

Appendix A: Information Sheet

Centre Owner/Manager

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET
(Centre owner/manager)

Project title: Teachers' Beliefs, Perceptions and Experiences of Educational Leadership and Leadership Identity

Name of Principal Investigator/Supervisor (PI): Dr Maria Cooper
Name of Student Researcher: Louise Gorst

Researcher introduction
My name is Louise Gorst. I am a master's student at the University of Auckland (UoA) in the Faculty of Education and Social Work. Dr Maria Cooper, a senior lecturer at the UoA in the Faculty of Education and Social Work is the Principal Investigator/Supervisor for my research.

Project description and invitation
In this research I will investigate Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers' beliefs of educational leadership, the types of leadership practice they have experienced and what their perceptions are of themselves as leaders. The research also seeks to identify what knowledge and experience might support teachers to negotiate and develop their leadership identity. My focus is on eligible teachers only.

From my personal and professional experience many teachers in ECE do not see themselves as leaders, but do engage in leadership practices. Literature on this topic suggests a lack of definition and understandings of leadership as well as the notion of leadership identity and how this could be transformed. These ideas have motivated me to explore how teachers might be supported with their own leadership knowledge, understanding and leadership identity.

I am inviting your centre to take part in this research, as your setting is one of the types of ECE settings that fit in with the research criteria, being a private/public/non-profit centre. If you are happy for your centre to participate I seek your assurance that teachers' choice to participate or not will have no effect on their employment or relationships with teachers or management in any way. I will be seeking volunteers to participate in my study. The criteria for selecting participants includes qualified and registered teachers with teaching experience of a minimum of two years and experience of being in a leadership role, never been in a leadership role or currently in a leadership role within any ECE context. I am looking for two to three teachers. If more than three indicate their interest to participate in this study, I will select the first three who meet the participant criteria. I will then let the others know by email that I have reached my capacity.

I am requesting your permission to ask your centre administrator to distribute the attached Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form to all eligible teachers to participate in my research project as voluntary participants.

I am also requesting permission for access to your centre's documentation, specifically your philosophy statement, centre policies relevant to teachers' and leaders' roles and responsibilities, and generic job descriptions for teachers and leaders.

Project procedures

This project will involve up to three eligible teachers in your centre to take part in one individual interview as well as one focus group, both being one hour long each. These will both be audio recorded and transcribed by myself, the student researcher. With your permission, I would like the interviews and the focus group to take place in your own centre at a time that is convenient to you and your participants. The individual interview will follow on from the focus group. They will both occur within a three-month timeframe.

Once the audio data from the individual interviews have been transcribed into text the transcripts will be returned to the participants for editing/verification, and returned within two weeks of receipt of the transcript. Due to group nature of the focus group, transcripts cannot be shared with participants for editing, as doing so would change the meaning of the collaborative discussion.
On completion of the project the participants will receive a hard copy of a summary of the research findings, if they have indicated this on their Consent Form.

Data storage/retention/destruction/future use

Data will be stored on a password-protected computer, which is connected to the UoA server. Consent forms will be stored in a securely locked cabinet in my supervisor's (the principal investigator) office at the UoA. All hard copy data will be shredded and electronic files deleted from hard drives and USB drives after six years.
The data collected will be used in a thesis and possibly journal publications and presentations to the early childhood community.

Right to withdraw from participation

As a centre, you will have the right to withdraw from the project at any time, without giving a reason. You will not be able to withdraw data that has already been given by individual participants. Participants are also given the right to withdraw themselves at any time, without giving a reason. They will also be able to withdraw their data up to two weeks after receiving their individual transcripts, without giving a reason, but will not be able to withdraw their data from the focus group.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality cannot be fully guaranteed, however all efforts will be made to keep the participants' and the centres identity confidential by using pseudonyms within the collating and reporting of the data obtained from the interview and the focus group.
All participants in the focus group will be made known to each other so confidentiality among the group is not possible, but again pseudonyms will be used in the reporting of the data of their names and the centres name.

If you consent for your centre the opportunity to participate in my research, please fill out the attached consent form within 2 weeks of receiving this information, and email back to me at louise.gorst@auckland.ac.nz
If you have any questions, you can email me directly at the same address.

Contact Details

Student Researcher
Louise Gorst
Louise.gorst@auckland.ac.nz

Project Investigator/Supervisor

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For any queries regarding ethical concerns you may contact the Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, Office of Research Strategy and Integrity, The University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Telephone 09 373-7599 ext. 83711. Email: humanethics@auckland.ac.nz

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on 19-Sep-2019 for three years. Reference number – 023739.

Appendix B: Consent Form

Centre Owner/Manager

CONSENT FORM

(Centre owner/manager)

THIS FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF SIX YEARS

Project title: Teachers' Beliefs, Perceptions and Experiences of Educational Leadership and Leadership Identity

Name of Principal Investigator/Supervisor (PI): Dr Maria Cooper
Name of Student Researcher: Louise Gorst

I have read the Participant Information Sheet and have understood the nature of the research and why the centre has been selected. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction.

- I agree for the centre to take part in this research.
- I understand the centre administrator will approach potential participants to distribute Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms.
- I give my assurance that teachers choice to participate or not will have no effect on their employment or relationships with teachers or management in any way.
- I understand that the researcher will have a one hour interview and a one hour focus group with the teacher participants.
- I agree for the interview and focus group to be carried out in my centre.
- I understand I am free to withdraw participation as a centre at any time, without giving a reason.
- I understand that I am unable to withdraw data that has already been given by individual participants.
- I understand that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, however, pseudonyms will be used to replace participants real names and the name of the centre.
- I understand that the interview data will be stored securely at the University of Auckland for 6 years, after which time it will be destroyed.
- I wish / do not wish to receive the summary of findings, which can be emailed to me at my email address below.

Name: _____
Signature: _____ Date: _____
Email: _____

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on 19-Sep-2019 for three years. Reference number - 023739.

Appendix C: Information Sheet

Teacher Participant

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET
(Teacher Participant)

Project title: Teachers' Beliefs, Perceptions and Experiences of Educational Leadership and Leadership Identity

Name of Principal Investigator/Supervisor (PI): Dr Maria Cooper
Name of Student Researcher: Louise Gorst

Researcher introduction
My name is Louise Gorst. I am a master's student at the University of Auckland (UoA) in the Faculty of Education and Social Work. Dr Maria Cooper, a senior lecturer at the UoA in the Faculty of Education and Social Work is the Principal Investigator/Supervisor for my research.

Project description and invitation
In this research I will investigate Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers' beliefs of educational leadership, the types of leadership practice they have experienced and what their perceptions are of themselves as leaders. The research also seeks to identify what knowledge and experience might support teachers to negotiate and develop their leadership identity. My focus is on eligible teachers only.

From my personal and professional experience many teachers in ECE do not see themselves as leaders, but do engage in leadership practices. Literature on this topic suggests a lack of definition and understandings of leadership as well as the notion of leadership identity and how this could be transformed. These ideas have motivated me to explore how teachers might be supported with their own leadership knowledge, understanding and leadership identity.

I am inviting you to take part in this research as you fit the teacher participant criteria. This includes being a qualified and registered teacher with teaching experience of a minimum of two years and experience of being in a leadership role, never been in a leadership role or currently in a leadership role within any ECE context. Your centre manager has given their assurance that your choice to participate or not will have no effect on your employment or relationships with teachers or management in any way.

Project procedures
This project will involve you to take part in one individual interview as well as one focus group, both being one hour long each. These will both be audio recorded and transcribed by myself, the student researcher. With permission from your centre's owner/manager I would like the interviews and the focus group to take place in your own centre at a time that is convenient to you. The individual interview will follow on from the focus group. They will both occur within a three-month timeframe. Once the audio data from the individual interviews have been transcribed into text the transcripts will be returned to participants, for editing/verification, and returned within two weeks of receipt of the transcript. Due to group nature of the focus group, transcripts cannot be shared with participants for

editing, as doing so would change the meaning of the collaborative discussion.
On completion of the project you will receive a hard copy of a summary of the research findings, if you have indicated this on your consent form.

Data storage/retention/destruction/future use

Data will be stored on a password-protected computer, which is connected to the UoA server. Consent forms will be stored in a securely locked cabinet in my supervisor's (the principal investigator) office at the UoA. All hard copy data will be shredded and electronic files deleted from hard drives and USB drives after six years.
The data collected will be used in a thesis and possibly journal publications and presentations to the early childhood community.

Right to withdraw from participation

As a participant, you will have the right to withdraw from the project at any time, without giving a reason. You will also be able to withdraw your data up to two weeks after receiving your individual transcript, without giving a reason, but you will not be able to withdraw your data from the focus group. During the one on one interview you will have the right to have the digital voice recorder turned off at any time, however, during the focus group the digital voice recorder will not be able to be turned off, but you can choose to either remain silent or you can leave the room.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality cannot be fully guaranteed, however all efforts will be made to keep your own and the centres identity confidential by using pseudonyms within the collating and reporting of the data obtained from the interview and the focus group.
All participants in the focus group will be made known to each other so confidentiality among the group is not possible, but again pseudonyms will be used in the reporting of the data of your name and the centre's name.

If you consent to participate in my research, please fill out the attached consent form within 2 weeks of receiving this information, and email back to me at louise.gorst@auckland.ac.nz
If you have any questions, you can email me directly at the same address.

Contact Details

Student Researcher
Louise Gorst
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Ph: 64 9 6238899 – Extn: 85619

For any queries regarding ethical concerns you may contact the Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, Office of Research Strategy and Integrity, The University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Telephone 09 373-7599 ext. 83711. Email: humanethics@auckland.ac.nz

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on 19-Sep-2019 for three years. Reference number – 023739.

Appendix D: Consent Form

Teacher Participant

THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND
Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau
NEW ZEALAND

EDUCATION AND SOCIAL WORK

CONSENT FORM
(Teacher Participant)
THIS FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF SIX YEARS

Project title: Teachers' Beliefs, Perceptions and Experiences of Educational Leadership and Leadership Identity

Name of Principal Investigator/Supervisor (PI): Dr Maria Cooper
Name of Student Researcher: Louise Gorst

I have read the Participant Information Sheet and have understood the nature of the research and why I have been selected. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction.

- I agree to take part in this research.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time, without giving a reason.
- I understand that the centre manager has given an assurance that my choice to participate or not will have no effect on my employment or relationships with teachers or management in any way.
- I understand that I will take part in a one hour individual interview and a one hour focus group either in my centre or in a centre within close proximity.
- I understand that I can withdraw my data from the individual interview at any time within two weeks of receiving my individual transcript, and that I cannot withdraw my data from the focus group.
- I agree to be audio recorded.
- I agree not to disclose anything discussed in the focus group.
- I understand that confidentiality cannot be fully guaranteed, but that pseudonyms will be used to replace my name and the name of the centre. However, I will be known to the participants in the focus group.
- I wish to receive a transcript of my interview for editing/verification, for completion within two weeks of receipt of the transcript.
- I wish / do not wish to receive a summary of the findings, which can be emailed to me at my email address below.
- I understand that the interview data will be stored securely at the University of Auckland for 6 years, after which time it will be destroyed.

Name: _____
Signature: _____ Date: _____
Email: _____

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on 19-Sep-2019 for three years. Reference number – 023739.

Appendix E

Focus Group Questions

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Questions

Warm-up:

- How long has the team been together – structure HT, 3 teachers (leadership hierarchy/roles/titles)

- Tell me what a typical day might look for your team? (Probe: non-contact times, routines, interacting with parents).

Focus Questions

- What types of things do some of you do to support the running/functioning of the environment/programme?

  (Probe: greeting new families, planning experiences, relievers, excursions).

- Are there specific roles and responsibilities within your team?

- What skills, knowledge and expertise do you think your team has?

  Is there anyone with a particular strength? Tell me more.

- What do you think the team does well together?

  (Strengths/expertise, point of difference/uniqueness).

- If you could think of one word, an image or metaphor of leadership in this place, what would that be?

  (Give a definition of the word 'metaphor' symbol, image).

- As a team, think of a time or situation where you all felt what a hard day… What did you do as a team to pull through?

  What did you learn from that experience?

- What experiences do you think might support a teacher to take on a leadership role?

  (Probe: what do they need to know, nature of current support).

Appendix F

Interview Questions

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Questions

Warm up:

Please tell me about your day-to-day practice in this kindergarten/centre?
- What are some of your responsibilities/roles/duties?
- What are your qualifications?

What brought you to this kindergarten/centre?
How long have you been here?

Focus: ECE teachers' beliefs around the types of leadership practice they have experienced

- What do you think of when you hear the word leadership?
- Tell me about a time where you have experienced or observed effective/positive leadership. What happened? (How? Who? Why?) – past leadership, still in, left it, why?/ family
- Tell me about a time where you have experienced or observed ineffective leadership. What happened? (How? Who? Why?) – How did that make you feel?

Focus: ECE teachers' perceptions of themselves as leaders

- Do you see yourself as a leader? (If not, why? If yes, in what ways?)
- Do you see any link between your past experiences and your current views about being a leader OR leading others? (If yes, tell me about this. If no, why do you think that is?)

Focus: Knowledge, structures and experience might support ECE teachers to negotiate and develop their own leadership identity

- Tell me about a positive experience where you have been encouraged to lead? What did this involve? (Probes: What was it like for you? Invited or expected? Support given?)
- Can you think of a negative experience where you have led but have felt unsupported? What happened and why? What support would have been helpful? What would you do differently now?
- What do you think are some key attributes/qualities of an effective leader in supporting others to lead?
- What do you think teachers need to know when considering opportunities to lead situations or others?
- Given your current role what professional learning support on leadership have you had? For example, a reading, yearly conference etc. – what was the topic? …

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