



The role of positional leaders in supporting professional learning



ECE resources

There is an expectation that those in positional leadership roles in early childhood education, such as team leader, centre manager or head teacher, will provide support, encouragement and professional learning opportunities for the teachers they lead¹. This guide will provide an outline of the research related to positional leaders supporting professional learning (including leadership learning), and consider the implications of this research for leadership practice in ECE.

Mentoring and coaching

There has been considerable debate about the difference between the terms 'mentoring' and 'coaching', but it is generally agreed that [mentoring](#) is a more holistic term that denotes an ongoing supportive relationship, whereas coaching involves more specific actions such as listening, questioning, goal setting, and providing feedback². Mentoring and coaching have been identified as important strategies for supporting leadership and professionalism in ECE settings both internationally³ and in Aotearoa New Zealand⁴. They are considered important leadership strategies for supporting the professional learning of individuals and teams⁵, and ECE leaders have a responsibility to mentor others in order to promote professional learning that leads to positive learning outcomes for children⁶. Importantly, those who mentor or coach others can benefit just as much from the relationship as those they mentor or coach.

While pockets of effective mentoring and coaching have been identified in ECE in New Zealand, a national survey has raised concerns about how mentoring and coaching are being practised in the wider sector⁷. A lack of agreement between teachers and positional leaders was revealed. Positional leaders in this study who were in a position to provide mentoring and nurture leadership in teachers perceived that this was occurring; however, the majority of teachers (the supposed mentees) did not agree. The actions of those leaders who did provide effective coaching and mentoring included facilitating goal setting, asking questions to provoke thinking, and providing support specific to each teacher's experience and situation. These actions are appreciated by teachers, who report that mentoring and coaching make them feel valued and understood. Such a mentoring and coaching approach does not necessarily involve specialised knowledge, but rather individual knowledge of each teacher's professional and personal capabilities and leadership journeys and how these can be supported.

Mentoring and coaching may also come from outside of the service. Research exploring the relevance of [professional learning communities](#) to the New Zealand ECE sector has discussed the similarity between the role taken by the facilitators/researchers and that of mentors and coaches. Actions taken in these roles include providing resources, non-judgemental listening, and questioning to encourage reflection⁸. Research has also shown that, when there is a high level of relational trust and the participants are willing to be challenged, deeper level questioning encourages reflection and can lead to shifts in practice⁹.

Critical friends

Research has identified the value of leaders in ECE taking on the role of critical friend. A critical friend¹⁰ is defined as a 'trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend'¹¹, who may be within or outside of an

educational setting. Research suggests that relationships with critical friends should be based on trust, honesty, and mutual respect, and be supportive and non-judgmental¹².

Acting as a critical friend can involve being willing to challenge others and to be challenged, and building a positive, strong team by being honest and upfront¹³. There has also been considerable research into the role of professional learning facilitators and researchers taking on the role as critical friends. This research suggests that critical friends from outside the setting may be better able to challenge teachers by questioning them, introducing them to different ways of thinking, and supporting robust improvement processes and practices¹⁴. Research also emphasises the importance of strong relationships between critical friends and teachers¹⁵.

Implications for leadership practice

There is clear evidence in the research literature that mentoring, coaching and critical friendships are all important strategies for providing support and encouragement as well as professional learning opportunities for those in ECE settings. Below are some practical suggestions that leaders in ECE can use to promote effective professional learning through mentoring, coaching and critical friendships.

Build relational trust by taking time to know each team member, being consistent in your actions, demonstrating competence, setting high expectations, allowing people to fail with dignity, helping others to cope with change, recognising others' strengths, and empowering others¹⁶.

Foster an organisational culture that leads to openness to change and a willingness to take risks, and encourages creative and innovative teaching practices, by ensuring that:

- there is robust and passionate debate of ideas and regular critique of teaching practices
- honest and constructive feedback is regularly given and received
- [open-to-learning conversations](#) occur
- the professional leader listens to others carefully and encourages views that challenge rather than reinforce current ways of thinking
- conflict is embraced as an opportunity for learning and reflection
- leaders encourage their colleagues to become involved in leadership

Focus on **coaching strategies such as active listening, asking open questions, giving non-judgmental feedback, and goal setting**. Questioning that supports reflection and that challenges current ways of thinking should be part of everyday practice. Most of us believe that we are better listeners and questioners than we really are, so recording coaching sessions can be a useful way of gaining perspective on how we coach and what we need to work on. Most universities offer post-graduate courses in coaching and mentoring that could provide a useful starting point.

Involve outside critical friends. Some services such as kindergartens already have this form of support but, if you do not, consider how you may draw on external networks. Taking opportunities to be involved in research studies, particularly those involving action research, is a great way of encouraging reflection and ongoing professional learning.

Recommended further reading

Cherrington, S. & Thornton, K. (2013). Continuing professional development in early childhood education in New Zealand. *Early Years: An international research journal*, 33(2), 119-132.

Harrington, C. (2015). Awakening beginning teachers' passion through mentoring. In C. Murphy & K. Thornton (Eds.), *Mentoring in early childhood education: A compilation of thinking, pedagogy and practice* (pp. 1-13). Wellington: NZCER Press.

Mitchell, L. & Cubey, P. (2003). *Professional development in early childhood settings: Best evidence synthesis iteration*. Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Education.

Thornton, K. (2020). Leadership in the early years: challenges and opportunities. *New Zealand Annual Review of Education*, 24, 42-57.

Endnotes

- 1 These expectations have been clarified in the revised Indicators of quality for early childhood education: what matters most (Education Review Office, 2020). The process indicator Kaihautū: Leaders foster collaboration and improvement; specifies that leaders are expected to 'ensure access to opportunities for professional learning and development that builds capability' (ERO, 2020, p.32). Examples of effective practice for this indicator include leaders mentoring and coaching teachers 'to develop their teaching and leadership capabilities' (p.32). Similarly, the importance of developing leadership and knowledge in others as well as participating in critical friendships is highlighted in the Educational leadership capability framework (Education Council, 2018).
- 2 Thornton, K. (2015). The impact of mentoring on leadership capacity and professional learning. In C. Murphy & K. Thornton (Eds.), *Mentoring in early childhood education: A compilation of thinking, pedagogy and practice* (pp. 1-13). Wellington, New Zealand: NZCER Press.
- 3 A study exploring the definitions and perceptions of leadership in the United Kingdom early years sectors highlighted the importance of leading others by mentoring and coaching along with being a role model and having a clear vision (Aubrey, C., Godfrey, R., & Harris, A., 2013, *How do they manage? An investigation of early childhood leadership*. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 41(5), 5-29).
- 4 Mentoring was identified as an important leadership development strategy in a study exploring notions of leadership in the Centres of Innovation programme (Thornton, K., 2005, *Courage, commitment and collaboration: Notions of leadership in the New Zealand ECE 'Centres of Innovation'*. Master's thesis. Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand). Mentoring approaches recommended in this study which explored how leadership was defined and enacted in several of the first-round Centres of innovation included developing relationships based on professionalism, mutual trust and respect. A study carried out by Clarkin-Phillips, exploring a particular model of professional development, identified coaching as an aspect of professional development that supported distributed leadership along with networking and collaboration (Clarkin-Phillips, J., 2007, *Distributing the leadership: A case study of professional development*. Unpublished master's thesis. University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand). Findings of Clarkin-Phillips' research included that distributed leadership is 'a significant factor in empowering teachers and affording them opportunities for ongoing learning and leadership' (p. 132). More recently, Egan Marnell (2021) in her case study research exploring how educational leadership is practised through internal evaluation processes, found that in one of the three services

she studied a coaching strategy was adopted in supporting teachers through the process of internal evaluation which in turn helped build a trusting work environment (Egan Marnell, C., 2021, Educational leadership practised through internal evaluation in New Zealand ECE services. Unpublished EdD thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington). A study focusing on practices of positional leaders in facilitating distributed leadership identified the importance of mentoring and coaching in supporting and encouraging teachers to become involved in leadership practice (Denee, R., & Thornton, K., 2017, Effective leadership practices leading to distributed leadership. *Journal of Educational Leadership, Policy and Practice*, 32(2), 33–45).

- 5 Rodd, J. (2013). *Leadership in early childhood* (4th ed.). Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin.
- 6 Waniganayake, M., Cheeseman, S., Fenech, M., Hadley, F., & Cheeseman, W. (2012). *Leadership: Context and complexities in early childhood education*. Melbourne: Open University Press.
- 7 Denee, R., & Thornton, K. (2017). Effective leadership practices leading to distributed leadership. *Journal of Educational Leadership, Policy and Practice*, 32(2), 33–45.
- 8 Thornton (2009) facilitated action learning groups as part of her doctoral research into blended action learning for leadership learning in ECE. As the researcher/facilitator she worked with small groups of leaders over a period of 6 to 8 months in both face-to-face sessions and online. Action learning involves a questioning and reflective listening process in response to a problem or issue in the context of a small group of learners. This role involved coaching in the practice of 'forming and encouraging trusting relationships characterised by empathy and support; and also, questioning and challenging participants to encourage reflective practice and leadership learning'. The coaching role also involved providing participants with options as to how they might proceed in their leadership journeys. As a result of being coached, participants in this study began to use coaching strategies with their teaching teams and several commented on how empowering their teachers found this approach (Thornton, K., 2009, *Blended action learning: Supporting leadership learning in the New Zealand early childhood education sector*. PhD thesis. Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand).
- 9 Thornton, K. & Cherrington, C. (2014). Leadership in professional learning communities. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 39(3), 94-102.
- 10 Critical friends are referred to in the capability of Attending to their own learning as leaders and their own wellbeing with the indicators including 'uses critical friends to discuss their own leadership practice and extend their knowledge and capabilities' (Education Council, 2018, *Educational leadership capability framework*. Wellington: Ministry of Education, p. 10).
- 11 Costa, A., & Kallick, B. (1995). Through the lens of a critical friend. In A. Coster & B. Kallick (Eds.), *Assessment in the learning organization: Shifting the paradigm* (pp. 153-156). Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD, p. 50.
- 12 Rodd, 2013.
- 13 Davitt, G., & Ryder, D. (2018). Dispositions of a responsible early childhood education leader: Voices from the field. *Journal of Educational Leadership, Policy and Practice*, 33(1), 18-31.

- 14 Researchers and other professional colleagues working alongside the Centres of Innovations referred to above have been likened to critical friends (Cherrington, C., Campbell, G., Vine-Adie, R., & McLaughlin, T., 2020, The role of critical friends and organisational leadership in supporting teacher inquiries in ECE settings. *Early Education*, 66, 53-56), and Hedges (Hedges, H., 2010, Blurring the boundaries: Connecting research, practice and professional learning. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 40(3), 299-314) took the role of critical friend in her doctoral study with the intention of gaining an understanding the context and the teachers' practices before introducing professional learning and collaborative discussion and critical analysis of their practice with the teachers. Thornton and Cherrington took the role of critical friends as well as researchers and facilitators when working with teachers in a professional learning community study. They found questioning and exposing teachers to different ways of thinking were found to be potential benefits of critical friends from outside of the service (Thornton, K., & Cherrington, S., 2019, Professional learning communities in ECE: A vehicle for professional growth. *Professional Development in Education*, 45(3), 418-432). Similarly, Cherrington et al. (2020) have described the role of critical friends in a Teacher-Led Innovation Fund programme as working collaborative and supporting 'robust engagement with data-informed inquiry processes and practices' (Cherrington et al., 2020, p. 54). More recently, Freeman (2021) described the role she took as researcher in a study involving collaborative action research to support scientific learning in New Zealand ECE services as similar to that of a critical friend. Her role involved facilitating, supporting, challenging and also teaching alongside teachers. Freeman also emphasised the importance of critical friends taking time to build trusting relationships in order that they understand the context and the aspirations of those they are working with (Freeman, S., 2021, Opening doors: Guiding teachers to intentionally facilitate science for young children. Submitted PhD thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington).
- 15 Freeman, 2021.
- 16 See Combs, J., Edmonson, S. & Harris, S. (2018) *The trust factor: Strategies for school leaders* (New York: Routledge) for more information on these and other trust building strategies.

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