

Leadership in ECE: A conversation with Professor Margaret Carr

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I have had the privilege of working with Margaret Carr in a variety of capacities over the past 15 years. I first encountered Margaret when I was a kindergarten teacher and studying for my Masters degree. Margaret was my lecturer for a paper entitled Early Years Curriculum and Assessment. Soon after completing this paper, I was employed at the Faculty of Education at the University of Waikato and was able to “learn the ropes” by joining Margaret in her Level 3 Developing Early Childhood Programmes paper. Subsequently Margaret has been the Chief Supervisor for both my Masters and PhD theses. I have also been fortunate enough to co-lead two TLRI projects with Margaret and been a researcher on a Marsden funded project led by Margaret.

Margaret has always practised shared leadership in the context of building capacity and mentoring new and emerging researchers and academics. Margaret is most interested in researching with teachers, exploring ideas and practice alongside them. It is this commitment to empowering others that is a hallmark of her career as a teacher and academic. This was no more apparent than in her “thank you” speech at her recent Emeritus Professor award ceremony at the University of Waikato: Margaret spoke mostly about others who shared the journey with her.

A number of recent events seem to indicate the timeliness of talking with Margaret about leadership: the 20th birthday of *Te Whāriki*, the revised 2017 version, and her receiving the award of Emeritus Professor. The following is a conversation between myself and Margaret about early childhood leadership.

Jeanette: *Margaret, thank you for sparing time to chat with me about leadership. I wonder if you have any more time now that you are sort of semi-retired. Can you share with me what initially comes to mind for you when you consider leadership in ECE?*

Margaret: *Mmm, you are quite right about sort-of-semi-retired – I seem to be as busy as ever with academic and early years matters. All of which I enjoy. It’s interesting that you ask me about leadership in ECE – I’ve been thinking a lot about this recently because of working with a group of researchers to write a paper about museum education in the early years (ECE and school).*

What does this have to do with leadership? I think it does. The title of the paper is Young children visiting a museum: Exhibits, children and teachers co-author the journey. “Co-authoring” looks like co-writing, but we wanted to use it in the sense of “having authority”. That means having the right, the power, to take a leading role in what happens. If authoring is about leading, co-authoring is about leadership. Does that make sense?

Jeanette: *Yes, that makes lots of sense: authoring, co-authoring, leadership. I can see the connections - it’s very much about being in charge and having authority which have certainly always been seen as characteristics of leadership, albeit fairly hierarchal leadership, but I’m guessing that’s not what you are exploring.*

Margaret: *No, certainly not. I’m interested in the connections between leadership as co-authoring and dispositions. I’ve talked a lot about learning dispositions in early childhood, and I’m pleased that the 2017 update of *Te Whāriki* includes dispositions as learning outcomes [p. 22].*

Portfolios of learning stories in an early childhood centre build up a learning disposition - and one of these dispositions might be 'to take a leadership role when possible and appropriate'.

Of course, I've always emphasised that a learning disposition has three parts: being ready, willing and able - inclination, sensitivity to occasion and ability - as David Perkins and colleagues at Harvard have said. I'm really interested in the "being willing" part because that takes us right back to the value of an environment in which the leadership is shared. In our case, leadership shared between the teachers or kaiako, but also shared with the children.

Jeanette: *Hmm, that's an interesting angle to pursue in terms of leadership: being ready, willing and able. Can you expand on this idea some more?*

Margaret: *Mmm, I sometimes wonder if I think in triangles.*

In the museum project that you and I researched in, we talk about "thinking in triangles", co-authoring encounters where kaiako, tamariki and taonga - teachers, children and artifacts - share the leadership role. A triangle is a very strong shape, and triangles sit nicely alongside each other, as in a taniko pattern, a weaving. Is being ready, willing and able a triangle too? I guess it could be. In the first Learning Story book I talk about these concepts being foregrounded and backgrounded. But I guess they are always bound together in a learning disposition.

We might think too about an early years teaching environment in terms of a leadership triangle, where the things, objects, resources, take a leadership role too. I haven't really thought about this - but the notion of a learning disposition as including "being willing", a sensitivity to occasion which includes the environment and the resources, and: whether, when and how children are entitled to access and use them.

Typically, in early childhood, children have access to objects and materials for playing, writing, painting and exploring for generous amounts of time during the day. In one of our research projects in an early childhood centre we talked about "being entitled" and wrote about Joseph, who always liked to know who was the "in-charger" in group play. He didn't usually want this for himself. We also documented the way in which being "in charge" was shared in collaborative play and we wrote about examples of distributed leadership and included a story about Joseph being "in charge" of making muffins. But the muffin recipe had authority too, and the teachers had established a programme in which the children were entitled to do baking but teachers were available for consultation, e.g. about reading the recipe.

Jeanette: *So "being willing" is about the environment providing opportunities for teachers and children to realise they can access resources and materials that will enable them to develop leadership capacities? There are certainly examples of "being willing" in the articles in this issue: One kindergarten valued children asking questions to find out about their community which afforded opportunities for teachers, children and whanau to develop leadership skills. Another centre How do the other sides of the "ready, willing and able" triangle contribute to shared leadership?*

Margaret: *For children?*

Jeanette: *Yes, for children*

Margaret: *Well for children "ready" is the inclination. And the research example - Joseph - revealed a place (the baking table) where Joseph was inclined to be "in charge" - perhaps because*

he knew the recipe, and liked muffins! Of course, the triangles of children, places and things are nested inside a wider pattern which includes the ways in which leadership is shared at Centre level. When we've researched in early childhood centres we've had many examples of this sharing. In the four Centres of Innovation projects that I've been involved in, good examples come to mind - from Roskill South and Mangere Bridge Kindergartens, Greerton Early Childhood Centre, and Te Kōhanga Reo o Mana Tamariki. In each of these examples the teachers as a collective were ready (inclined, not afraid of) taking on research leadership. Perhaps their experience of writing Learning Stories had invited an inclination to research further.

At Roskill South the research was about the role of technology, and the technology – especially the cameras – was a good example of the children's authority built into the technology. The children took photos of what interested them, and the teachers included their photos (and spontaneous drawings) in their portfolios, making the authorship clear. At Mangere Bridge, where the research was about transition to school, the children chose the Learning Stories that they would like to take to school in their Transition to School Books, and they dictated some commentary in the front of these books.

At Mana Tamariki, the kaiako would highlight the name of the centre and school – upholding the concept of the tamariki having mana. In the final book from the Centres of Innovation Project they write about and exemplify “Nga hononga i Mana Tamariki: Reciprocal relationships at Mana Tamariki”. At Greerton, the topic was about their culture of shared leadership, and they published a nice story called “Who's the Boss?”.

Tragically, that COI programme was cut off mid-stream. I hope it will be revived. It was a great example of teachers' leadership – in all the Centres of Innovation the teachers and kaiako developed the topic they wanted to research, wrote the application, and chose the external research advisors. They did the research, and wrote it up for a series of books, edited by Anne Meade and published by NZCER Press.

Jeanette: *The COI programme did provide great opportunities for teachers to take the lead in the research. The last side of the triangle is: being able?*

Margaret: *Yes. But don't forget the strength of the triangle. A good example of this at both the Centre level and the individual child level is when children dictate their own Learning Stories. The second Learning Story book has examples of this. Given permission, children recognise their own learning abilities and progress, and want some of them written down.*

Jeanette: *The 1996 version of Te Whāriki outlined responsibilities for management...in relation to the implementation of the curriculum and this aspect has been replicated in the 2017 version. How do you see the principles and strands contributing to a framework for leadership that includes co-authoring of the curriculum?*

Margaret: *The strands are all domains of the principle Whakamana. In my reading, that principle insists that authority is shared while Wellbeing, Belonging, Contribution, Communication and Exploration are being interwoven holistically as a whāriki; the wider world of family and community is also part of that weaving, as the Bronfenbrenner ecological view always maintained. And responsive relationships between and across the past, the present and the future, and between and across the land, the rivers, the mountains, the oceans and the people*

are always on our minds. People talk about “mindfulness” in many ways – perhaps it applies here as an overarching principle of leadership in education?

“Who is the boss?” is always a good question, and some schools are beginning to raise these questions too, trialling a more open environment in the early years – perhaps recognising the value for learning of thinking in triangles.

Jeanette: *Yes, “Who is the boss?” is a very good question and one that will continue to be asked by policy makers, managers, leaders, teachers, children and families at different times and in different contexts. I would like to think that there will always be an understanding that leadership can take many forms and shapes and our learning environments are all the richer for embracing a diverse embodiment of leadership.*

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