

**Educational leadership in
Aotearoa New Zealand:
Issues of context and social justice**

Edited by
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Chapter 8 When the odds are stacked against: Leadership decisions that shift the odds

Jeanette Clarkin-Phillips

Setting the scene

Involvement in early childhood education has long been regarded as beneficial for children and their families. Ensuring that communities have access to high-quality early childhood education where families feel welcomed can be extremely challenging in the face of reduced funding, particularly in disadvantaged communities. Leadership with a strong sense of social justice is pivotal in providing more equitable opportunities for communities who have the odds stacked against them. Drawing on the findings from a case study of a kindergarten labelled 'vulnerable', the following narrative of the transformation of the kindergarten illustrates the role of leadership in helping shift those odds.

Taitoko Kindergarten, situated in Levin, was opened in the early 1980s under the auspices of the Wellington Region Free Kindergarten Association, now known as He Whānau Manaaki o Tararua¹ Free Kindergarten Association Incorporated. Kindergarten Associations

1 Loosely translated to mean 'the caring family of the Tararua region'.

provide services that include central administrative support, leadership, and mentoring by an itinerant 'senior' teacher, professional development opportunities, association-wide policy development, and capital works and maintenance projects.

Initially, Taitoko Kindergarten operated a sessional licence for two groups of 30 children with two teachers. The kindergarten session times (8.45–11.45am and 12.45–2.45pm) mirrored the compulsory school sector calendar. As required by legislation, the kindergarten was staffed by qualified teachers, both of whom held a 2-year New Zealand Kindergarten Diploma. Over the period 2009–12 the kindergarten expanded its hours of operation to align with school hours, and increased the roll to accommodate 42 children including under-2-year-olds. These changes have required an increase in staffing and a major renovation of the environment. There are now 10 teachers employed at the kindergarten.

The kindergarten is located on the 'wrong side of the tracks' in the poorest area of town. The community comprises a range of ethnicities: Māori (41.1%), Pasifika (14.7%), European (63.1%), and Asian (2.0%). In 2004 the fate of the kindergarten hung in the balance due to falling rolls, staffing issues, and a negative reputation: the odds were stacked against it. By 2014 the kindergarten employed 14 staff in various capacities, had expanded its operations, provided a range of services for the community, and offered opportunities for adults to realise their aspirations. The transformation of the kindergarten over a decade is the result of leaders at various levels 'sticking their necks out' to fight the odds.

The first significant event for the kindergarten was the appointment by the Kindergarten Association of a new general manager in 2003. One of the initial decisions faced by Mandy, the new general manager, was about the fate of Taitoko Kindergarten. Two previous general managers had identified Taitoko Kindergarten as a candidate for closure and the current staff seemed to be waiting for the inevitable to happen. However, Mandy convinced the Kindergarten Association board of trustees to keep the kindergarten open. This decision was based on the role that Mandy felt the kindergarten was fulfilling in the community, particularly for young mothers. She chose to take affirmative action in dealing with the issues at the kindergarten, and a well-respected and

experienced teacher (Caryll) was appointed in a relieving capacity to work alongside the staff.

Another significant event in the transformation of the kindergarten was its successful bid for a Parent Support and Development (PS&D) contract in 2005. The PS&D was a cross-sectoral early intervention programme for vulnerable children developed by government ministers and officials during 2003–04. Four key elements to the programme included improving health, education, and parent support services for vulnerable children and their families through building on existing universal and targeted services as well as improved co-ordinating, identifying, and needs-assessment by different agencies.

Winning a PS&D contract gave the kindergarten extra funding and enabled the head teacher to be released to build relationships with service agencies in the community so that the teachers could facilitate families' access to support. It also enabled the community to begin to see Taitoko Kindergarten in a more positive light and develop a stronger sense of belonging for families.

Leaders living their values

Prior to her appointment as general manager, Mandy's employment background was in the field of education; first as a primary classroom teacher and then as principal of a primary school in a working class suburb of the city in which she grew up. Her most recent position was as elected head of the country's largest education union. Applying for the position of general manager seemed incongruous with Mandy's beliefs and values about workers and bosses, particularly after her position in the union. However, she was able to reconcile her decision when she realised she had experience and knowledge that could be used in the role and that the values of the kindergarten movement aligned with her own: "That classic belief that our role is actually to make life—to make the world a better place. And that, the role of kindergarten, the role of early childhood education is really to enhance communities."

Rather than act in what would be deemed a fiscally responsible manner and close the kindergarten, Mandy chose to keep it open for the small number of young single mothers ('vulnerable' in the state's eyes) who attended regularly with their children. Mandy's decision implied a commitment to social justice: keeping the kindergarten open, against

the odds, to support 'vulnerable' parents. Although the kindergarten continued to face challenges for the next 2 or so years, Mandy saw the benefits that keeping the kindergarten open was having on the community. In the first instance, the kindergarten was providing opportunities for young mothers to feel less socially isolated. As the kindergarten began to build a more positive reputation in the community, it started to become a focal point in the community and closing the kindergarten became a less favourable option. Mandy's commitment to social justice influenced the way in which she viewed the financial viability of kindergartens and how she used resources and regulatory structures to engage in systemic change. Rather than defining a kindergarten's success by its financial health, Mandy used the impact on children and families as the determinant for viability, and looked for other ways to support the financial resourcing of the kindergarten.

Mandy also had a strong belief in empowering others. She demonstrated trust in others' abilities to make decisions for their communities. When Caryll, the new head teacher at Taitoko, saw the advertisement for the PS&D pilot and approached Mandy about applying for a contract, Mandy mobilised personnel and resources within the Kindergarten Association to support the writing of the application. Over the ensuing years of the PS&D contract and beyond, Mandy continued to support the teaching team to implement initiatives at Taitoko Kindergarten.

Empowering others and operating from a strengths-based approach has been integral to the continued success of Taitoko Kindergarten. Caryll was initially asked to relieve and support the teaching team while some of the staffing issues were resolved. She came to Taitoko Kindergarten as an 'outsider', who quickly learned of the reputation of the community. Caryll made a decision to apply for a permanent position at Taitoko Kindergarten based on a mother's negative comments about no one ever staying long at Taitoko. When Caryll told the mother she was staying, the mother queried her decision. Caryll informed her that she felt strongly about families feeling positive about their communities and the opportunities available to their children. Caryll's belief in the right of every child to have a fair and equal chance and her strengths-based acceptance of people led her to ignore and even disrupt the label of 'vulnerable'. She determined very quickly that a priority for the teaching team was to settle on a shared philosophy, which

included an acceptance of people “however they come” and that they would be made to feel welcomed. Acceptance and hospitality became significant hallmarks of practice at Taitoko Kindergarten.

The philosophy of empowerment and building leadership capacity has been a significant strength of the kindergarten. In 2012 Caryll accepted Mandy’s proposal that Caryll lead the team at another local kindergarten in adapting their centre to be a Pasifika-focused kindergarten. Time frame imperatives meant that Caryll essentially left Taitoko Kindergarten overnight and Tania, a teacher at Taitoko Kindergarten, took over as head teacher. Tania had the confidence to be the head teacher due to Caryll’s mentoring and nurturing, coupled with an expectation that she had the skills and qualities to fulfil the role. Tania has continued to build the leadership capacity of parents at the kindergarten as well as empower her colleagues to utilise their strengths in leadership roles.

Shared decision making

As the PS&D contract unfolded, Caryll determined to use the skills and strengths of the community, encouraging them to share the decision making and determine what might work for them. This generated a number of initiatives, which strengthened the place of Taitoko Kindergarten in the community and enhanced the kindergarten’s reputation. One of the most successful and sustainable initiatives was a coffee/play group. This was instigated at the suggestion of one of the mothers, Carmella, who Caryll had supported to take on an administrative role at the kindergarten. The administrative role offered Carmella part-time, flexible employment and opportunities to be the ‘ear’ of the community, which enabled the teaching team to build responsive and reciprocal relationships with families. Carmella felt a coffee/play group would offer informal opportunities for families to come and socialise at the kindergarten, particularly those with younger children who were not attending kindergarten.

The coffee/play group is still operating over a decade later. Parents are responsible for deciding what happens on a weekly basis, with the teachers supporting the organisation and operation of the group. The activities of the coffee/play group range from workshops and guest speakers offering information and practical sessions about a variety

of health topics, literacy, child development and parenting, financial literacy, cooking and sewing, and obtaining a driver's licence. These sessions have enabled families to become familiar with different agencies and services and to have a name and a face to connect with if needed. Similarly, the personnel from various agencies have realised the value of building relationships with the kindergarten and being a 'familiar face', breaking down some barriers and misconceptions that were apparent in the community.

Parents' involvement with the coffee/play group has enabled teachers to find out about their strengths and interests and how these might be utilised in the kindergarten programme. The group has also provided an avenue for parents to discuss their aspirations for themselves and their children, and how the kindergarten teachers and management might support these aspirations. Significant changes to the operation of the kindergarten have resulted from these discussions and open consultation. Extended hours of operation to enable children to be at kindergarten for a 'school day' and the provision of affordable, healthy lunches were implemented in 2010. A parent who had previous experience as a chef suggested that the kindergarten provide lunches. This idea was taken up and the parent was employed as the cook. The knowledge that their child could have a substantial lunch regardless of their ability to pay at the time, or at all, helped alleviate the precarious financial situations of a number of the families in the community.

In 2009, despite strong lobbying to a newly elected government, funding for the PS&D ceased. Mandy and her management team were able to continue to fund some of the initiatives such as the kaimahi (cultural support worker) and head teacher release. Their continuation has, however, become increasingly challenging due to persistent funding cuts to the sector. It is the commitment to, and a belief in the benefits for, the community that make resourcing these initiatives a priority for the management.

Families as leaders

The commitment by leaders at both levels of management (Kindergarten Association and head teacher) to build leadership capacity and empower individuals has had far-reaching consequences for the kindergarten community. In a community such as Taitoko, families often lack the

social and cultural capital to navigate the machinations of bureaucracy and legislation in order to realise their aspirations. Having someone recognise and support their strengths is empowering. Another key aspect of families sustaining their involvement and developing leadership capabilities has been the non-judgemental, non-stigmatising attitude of the teachers. It was crucial for families that teachers did not make judgements about their parenting skills and life circumstances; families were welcomed unconditionally. For a number of families, being involved in the life of the kindergarten has been life changing. One of these people is Kirstie. Kirstie grew up in Levin in a single parent family affected by a gambling addiction, and by default she became the major caregiver for her younger sister. Following the death of her mother, 15-year-old Kirstie left school and found employment wherever she could, usually in low-paid, unskilled jobs in fast food outlets. She had her first child when she was 21 who she parented on her own for about 3 years. Kirstie's involvement at Taitoko Kindergarten began when Caryll stopped her on the street one day and suggested she bring her children to kindergarten. Kirstie took up Caryll's invitation: I just became part of the kindergarten, literally. When I would go in the mornings to drop my kids off, I wouldn't go home. I just stayed there and I just hung out, kind of learnt things [about being a parent], met people, and was just supported by Caryll. Being at kindergarten helped me to be confident, getting involved in the kids' education, like knowing it was OK to ask questions.

Encouraged by Caryll, Kirstie took on the role of committee chairperson and was soon playing an integral part in the life of the kindergarten. Over a 6-year period, Kirstie held a variety of roles at the kindergarten: Committee chairperson, kaimahi, education support worker, and kindergarten chef. During her time at the kindergarten, Kirstie saw her friends Carmella and Makelera commence studying for their teaching qualifications. The idea that she was capable of tertiary study seemed like an impossibility to Kirstie although she demonstrated a growing interest in her own and other children's learning. However, within a short time, Kirstie was persuaded to apply to do her Bachelor of Teaching degree despite the perceived inconceivability of this prospect for someone from her background and experience. Kirstie commented:

[There were no expectations about education] and I had no expectations, only one other of my cousins from my whole entire family has gone off to university—that's it, all the other cousins either work or have kids so I'm the second person out of our whole family to actually do tertiary study.

Kirstie is committed to empowering others and sharing her experiences so that others can be inspired. She is encouraged by the changed reputation of Taitoko Kindergarten and how it is now a preferred choice for families in Levin—even those from the other side of the railway tracks. Kirstie is thrilled, too, that other parents are being afforded opportunities similar to her own and taking on responsibilities that contribute to the sustainability of the kindergarten. For example, another mother has taken over Kirstie's role as chef, even though her child is now attending school.

Other families have found opportunities to realise their aspirations through their involvement with the kindergarten. Carmella, a teen parent who took on the administrative role at the kindergarten, has since completed a teaching qualification and is employed at the early childhood centre attached to the teen parent unit at the local high school. Carmella realises the benefits of her experiences at the kindergarten and that certain practices have become embedded in her way of being. She took into her employment situations the same philosophy about building relationships that she encountered at Taitoko. The values and beliefs she encountered at Taitoko guide her practice as a teacher at a different early childhood centre. Carmella also recognises she has a role and responsibility in supporting others:

We were empowering the community and that's how we all got to know one another. We probably wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for those sorts of connections and links and recognising that family is part of community. It inspires me to do that to others and say, 'Hey look you can be a mother and be a teacher and all sorts and be whatever you want to be and it's ok and we're here to help you' and that's why I think we can be a help because we had the support, it was normal, it was natural.

Over the years, families have taken up opportunities at the kindergarten such as kaimahi, coffee-come-play group facilitator, education

support worker for children with disabilities, administrator, and kindergarten chef. They have also been able to pursue other aspirations. Today, five parents have completed their teaching qualification and are now employed in various kindergartens or early childhood centres in Levin. Of the five, four were teen parents who left school without any formal qualifications. A number of other parents have undertaken further study or obtained qualifications and found employment in areas of interest and expertise.

The empowering of these families and their subsequent reach into the wider community has been a significant factor in engendering pride in the community. As Kirstie attested, Taioko Kindergarten is no longer seen as being a place to avoid. Demographically the community is similar to that of 2005 and statistically the odds are still stacked against families. However, families are being empowered to realise their aspirations through their involvement at the kindergarten. The odds have changed. Mandy neatly summarises the impact of the kindergarten on the community and reinforces the need to replicate the opportunities provided by the kindergarten:

What the kindergarten has provided in terms of the story that it tells, the journey that it's taken, and now what it's achieving—you can't measure that in money. And that's to the benefit of everybody. Now the rolls are bulging and it plays a really important role in the community so we actually need to replicate the kindergarten.

Over the period 2012–14, the Kindergarten Association found opportunities to further influence the provision of early childhood education in Levin. One of the other kindergartens in the area that served a strong Pasifika community was renamed and reconstituted to better reflect the aspirations of the community. The Samoan teacher at Taioko, and two parents from Taioko—one Tongan and one Samoan—who had completed teaching qualifications, were all employed at this kindergarten. A community education and care centre that was struggling to remain viable came under the auspices of the Association while a long awaited Teen Parent Unit at a local secondary school opened. The Association won the contract for the early childhood centre attached to this unit. Carmella and Kirstie are both employed at this centre.

What leadership values contributed to the transformation of Taitoko Kindergarten?

In the instance of the transformation of Taitoko Kindergarten, it might be said that 'it got lucky'—lucky that Mandy was able to convince the board to keep it open. However, if we are interested in effective leadership for social justice, we need to look further than a theory of 'luck'. Bourdieu's thinking tool of habitus is helpful in providing some insight into the decision making about and vision for Taitoko Kindergarten.

Habitus, according to Bourdieu (1977), includes the dispositions, rules, and conditioning (social and cultural capital) inherent in family structures and handed down via social transmission. The inclination or propensity to act in a certain way is influenced by the 'structured structures' of the family and groups of our social world. Habitus is how we carry our history within us, how we bring that history into our current circumstance, and how we make decisions to act in certain ways. In short, habitus is the story we live by. Mandy's habitus had been shaped by strong working class values based on collectivity and social justice practices of 'doing good works'. It cannot be denied that in the first instance Mandy's commitment to social justice and her collective and individual habitus structured over time and circumstance ensured that Taitoko Kindergarten was given a second chance. Both of these factors—a habitus steeped in social justice and the altruistic values of an organisation based on improving lives—provided a vehicle for supporting a failing kindergarten and resisting the capitalist ideology that eliminates loss-making components of an organisation.

Caryll's leadership demonstrated dispositions and ways of being that valued the contributions of others and ensured families had opportunities to engage in the life of the kindergarten. These values had come from her upbringing in a small rural community where "everyone looked out for each other" and resources were shared to ensure people's needs were met. The stories recounted by her parents about their early lives gave Caryll an appreciation for the impact of circumstances on successive generations and the fact that not everyone has the same opportunities. Caryll felt her early experiences had a significant bearing on the structuring of her values and beliefs, influencing the "story she lived by."

The strengths-based approach inherent in Caryll's leadership included mentoring of both families and teachers. There is ample research that highlights the benefits of parents being involved in their children's education and that encouraging this involvement during early childhood has long-lasting effects (Belsky, Barnes, & Melhuish, 2007; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). In many cases, the involvement of families is seen as beneficial, not only for children but also for adults, particularly if there is access to services other than education (Corter & Pelletier, 2010; Press, Sumsion, & Wong, 2010; St Pierre, Layzer, & Barnes, 1995). However, involving families in their children's education can be challenging, especially in communities where families' experiences of education have been negative and in which labels such as 'vulnerable', 'disadvantaged', or 'deprived' stigmatise communities. Caryll's determination that families would feel welcomed and that they would be involved in the life of the kindergarten culminated in family participants replicating opportunities in other contexts. The mentoring that occurred over time for teachers also contributed significantly to Tania's confidence in taking over the leadership of the kindergarten.

Mandy and Caryll both possessed substantial amounts of social capital within the field of early childhood education and, more specifically, the kindergarten. This capital was used to manipulate and strategise in favour of Taitoko Kindergarten and fight the odds so that families could increase their social capital and have the opportunity to be successful in their chosen fields. Bourdieu (1977) ascertained that interactions between individuals in a field were generally about domination and tussles for positions with regard to social, cultural, and economic capital. In contrast, however, individuals with a commitment to social justice are less concerned with 'bettering' their position in a field and more concerned with giving others opportunities by levelling the playing field. There is little evidence in the example of Mandy or Caryll that their primary focus was to enhance their standing or position in the field of early childhood education.

Identifying the characteristics of the habitus of those responsible for decision making at Taitoko Kindergarten has implications for future initiatives aimed at addressing issues to do with vulnerability. Strengths-based approaches to vulnerability view individuals, families,

and groups as “people with promise” rather than “people at risk” (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003, p. 171). Such an approach assumes individual agency and the use of resources to act on and in the environment to make changes. It interrupts the pathologising of vulnerability (Laursen, 2000) and deflects the tendency to ‘blame’ individuals for their circumstances. In relation to engaging families in early childhood education and school it is often, as Boag-Munroe and Evangelou (2012) point out, the attitudes or assumptions of the school or early childhood centre, about the family, that results in a lack of engagement rather than the family actually being hard to reach or vulnerable. The authors also suggest that the labelling of families as hard to reach “disguises the complexities of the lives of these families and the factors which led to their disengagement” (Boag-Munroe & Evangelou, 2012, p. 210).

Leadership that is committed to social justice has a high degree of social capital in a field, the ability to recognise an individual’s strengths, and the capacity to support and sustain change. These are all key attributes evident in the practices of the leadership associated with Taitoko Kindergarten. These attributes have enabled the utilisation and provision of opportunities that have contributed to an empowered community and opportunities for families to realise personal and professional aspirations.

Questions for readers

- How are families welcomed and empowered?
- How can leadership encourage relationship building with support agencies?
- How can leadership disrupt discourses of vulnerability?

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her research investigated principal perceptions of self and change. She has recent and forthcoming publications in pedagogical leadership practices, and the transformation of professional identity in experienced primary school principals.

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Cathy Wylie's main research focus has been on policy and its impacts for school leadership, teaching, and students, and the longitudinal study *Competent Learners*, which has provided important understanding about different trajectories of engagement and achievement in learning. Her 2012 book, *Vital connections* (NZCER Press), makes a cogent case for system change to strengthen all our schools and counter uneven educational opportunities. She is a Chief Researcher at the New Zealand Council for Educational Research.