

## Building strong connections: The potential of relational leadership to empower early childhood educators as leaders.

**Sanitra Deo** | *New Zealand Tertiary College*

**Shuchita Jain** | *Team Leader Early Childhood*

This article explores the importance of relational leadership in the context of early childhood education, emphasising the creation of strong relationships and a positive team culture. Insights are provided by a team leader who showcases relational leadership practices and discusses their implementation. The leader underscores the significance of trust, respect, and transparency in fostering mutually reciprocal relationships with team members, enabling collaborative decision-making and shared goals. The concept of relational leadership is discussed, highlighting its focus on understanding interpersonal relationships and its active involvement in the leadership process, rather than an authoritative figure acting as the main catalyst (Clarke, 2018). The characteristics of a relational leader, including self-awareness, trust and empathy as essential factors in cultivating and reinforcing team relationships are analysed (Coleman, 2018; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019; Potter, 2020). Ultimately, the article serves as an important reminder that leadership revolves around establishing meaningful connections and fostering teamwork.

### Introduction

In New Zealand, the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) places significant emphasis on fostering strong relationships between tamariki, kaiako, and whānau. This focus recognises that building and nurturing positive relationships are crucial for the holistic development of ākonga (MoE, 2017). Hood (2023) emphasises the importance of actively listening to diverse perspectives in order to build a strong foundation in relationships. This concept is closely related to teacher leadership, which offers an opportunity for the entire team, regardless of their hierarchical positions, to collaborate in "sharing pedagogical knowledge, problem-solving, and decision-making" (Cooper, 2018, p. 8). By focusing on the collective efforts of the team, this approach aligns well with relational leadership, which prioritises the development of skills for cultivating meaningful relationships and fostering a positive team culture (Lee et al., 2022). Relational leadership goes beyond simply forming relationships and emphasises the importance of trustworthiness and respect within the team (Crevani, 2015). Klevering and McNae (2018) found these attributes are a prerequisite in leadership roles and are particularly effective in early childhood settings. Waniganayake et al. (2017) add that prioritising to foster a sense of community and shared purpose among team members can improve communication and collaboration; leading to better outcomes for tamariki.

This article will examine the advantages of utilising a relational leadership approach through discussions with a team leader of a preschool room from a childcare setting. The childcare centre caters to over 75 children aged two to five years old. The discussion offers an insight into the team leader's relational approach to leadership and how it could be implemented and practised in early childhood settings. Team Leader, Savira (pseudonym being used), 44, comes from an Indian background. She has been an educator since 2001 and has set examples of authentic teaching practices throughout her educational journey both in India and New Zealand. Savira has been an early childhood teacher since 2019 and is proud to lead a diverse team that includes both female and male kaiako who come from different parts of the world.

### **Interconnected nature of leadership and relationships**

According to Rodd (2020), recent research on leadership in early childhood education has observed a significant shift towards a more inclusive and relational perspective. The effectiveness of a leader is not solely measured by their technical skills or ability to achieve certain goals, but by how well they are able to establish mutually beneficial relationships with those they lead (Klevering & McNae, 2018). Cooper (2018) also regards the importance of working collaboratively but admits that maintaining collegiality can be a possible challenge for a relational leader. Based on our discussion, Savira observed that building supportive relationships within the team can be challenging when compromises need to be made. Initially, Savira observed the challenge of building relationships with those team members who seemed to be unable to make concessions. However, she believed it was important to be patient and work collaboratively to find solutions to problems and keep empowering her team. Savira recollects that being patient as a leader not only helped her engage in positive interactions with others but also role model professional responses constructively, thereby building intra-team relationships day by day. Being patient also gave Savira more time to understand her team members and demonstrate empathy. Savira believed in not altering one's personality but maintaining it and finding solutions to challenges in a harmonious way, along with sustaining the shared goals among each team member. It is worth noting that leadership is contingent upon the context and how individuals perceive and interpret situations, which can be influenced by their beliefs and expectations regarding the behaviours of others (Clarke, 2018).

Leaders can only live up to the expectations of leadership when they are accepted as leaders, which is indicative that "leadership is not a one-way influence process but rather a reciprocally influenced relationship" (Shamir, as cited in Branson & Marra, 2019, p. 93). In essence, the root of leadership lies in the two-way and fluid connection between each team member and the leader, highlighting the trust and empathy for each other and nurturing a shared vision. Denee (2017) found that a collective approach to practice, honest reflection and evaluation, shared vision, and openness to change cannot be attained without a strong relational foundation. This involves the presence of trust and empathy between team members, as well as a culture of collaboration and inquiry. Without these conditions, members may not feel safe to engage in the process. Therefore, growth in leadership is seen to be most effectively accomplished through connecting with others, engaging with them in a sustained and active way, thereby having a reciprocal influence that helps each person grow (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019; Rodd, 2020). When asked about how she prioritises and maintains strong relationships with her team members, Savira replied;

I ensure that no member within our communication circle misses out on any information or feels unheard. I take this as a priority and thus welcome the ideas, suggestions, and responses from every team member. Applying ‘perspective thinking’, I actively listen to their viewpoints and reciprocate by sharing mine. Such an exchange of thoughts within a team gives me a clearer vision of seeing the situation from a second person’s perspective before analysing it further.

Wearing an appreciative lens, according to Savira, is a vital factor that instils positivity among the team members and empowers them to take ownership of their thoughts and contribute further towards strengthening the relationships within the team. Biddle (2012) affirms the above viewpoint by accentuating that building and strengthening relationships lie at the base of any leadership role. Biddle (2012) signifies that an ideal leadership in early childhood education is open-ended as it allows others to contribute their expertise and share the load so that each member becomes an integral part of the network by learning from each other and improving their practices thereby reinstating the compatibility of relationships.

### **Understanding relational leadership**

Rather than focusing on an individual leadership style, a relational perspective in leadership emphasises the importance of understanding the relationships between people and their involvement in the leadership process (Mehr, 2019). Clarke (2018) terms relational leadership as an “umbrella” concept (p.12), encompassing various leadership theories and perspectives that share common assumptions about leadership. Relational leadership acknowledges that many individuals can exhibit leadership regardless of their formal roles, viewing leadership as a potential capacity within organisations beyond recognised leaders. Central to relational leadership is the understanding that leadership primarily occurs through relationships and networks of relationships (Epitropaki et al., 2018). The knowledge, ideas, and expertise of individuals at all levels are identified as critical assets to achieve common goals. Despite the challenge posed by diverse personalities and perspectives within a team, the relational model of leadership fosters openness, collaboration, and inclusion (Crevani, 2015). Meanwhile, relational leadership encourages the development of skills and abilities that facilitate reflective practices, efficacy, and innovative approaches in becoming effective frontline leaders (Lee et al., 2022). Speaking about collaboration and inclusion, head teacher Savira punctuates:

The foundation of strong relationships with my team members lies in three crucial components: trust, respect, and transparency. Balancing these elements is a continuous effort, and I actively promote collective discussions and shared decision-making within my team. By fostering a culture of inclusion and valuing everyone’s contributions, I aim to empower each member and make them feel valued. Being available and open to my team helps them understand my perspective and encourages their growth as potential leaders in the future.

This culture adopted by Savira allows for co-construction of knowledge and a sense of security, enabling individuals to rely on each other to perform their best, as highlighted by Biddle (2012). In teacher leadership, this emphasis on

collective decision-making acts as a key factor in fostering strong teamwork and creating a pathway for new teachers to learn and refine their skills (Branson & Marra, 2019; Cooper, 2014). Such a relational model of leadership, according to Biddle (2012), facilitates the formation of a vision that is shared equally by each member of the team. Arguably, this relational model differs from distributed leadership in its emphasis on followers and the foundational role of knowledge in leadership. Relational leadership is characterised by self-organisation and emergence, with a focus on social and collective aspects (Clarke, 2018). It operates through relationships and is influenced by a bottom-up and mutual approach, whereas distributed leadership acknowledges task distribution but still centres on the formal authoritative figure as the driving force in the process (Denee, 2017). Relational leaders aim for a process and goal-based working system through professional talks, listening to others' perspectives and streamlining ideas into action (Cooper, 2018; Hood, 2023). According to Branson and Marra (2019), relational leaders are inclusive towards the team members and provide a safe and secure atmosphere for all. In this way, leadership is tailored to the unique context of the organisation and is not generic or one-size-fits-all. Thus, the focus is maintained on the development of individuals, encouraging them to reach their full potential by creating an equitable environment where everyone's perspectives are valued, opportunities are evenly distributed, and diverse voices are heard and acknowledged (Branson & Marra, 2019).

### **Unlocking characteristics of a relational leader**

In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "be the change you want to see in others." The quote directs towards developing relational characteristics within a leader first so as to facilitate the desired orchestration of the team. When asked about the characteristics that paved her way to the leadership role, team leader Savira recollects that she has consistently embraced the principle of treating others as she would wish to be treated, forming the foundation for her respectful approach that nurtures relationships. She actively pursues chances for learning, remaining receptive to feedback to refine her practice continuously. Recognising each experience as a chance to advance professionally, she acknowledges the value of ongoing growth. The pursuit of these qualities has notably contributed to her ascent to a leadership role.

Further, Savira also highlights the need to establish a smooth communication channel within the team; be it verbal or maintaining a communication diary. She repeatedly demonstrates practices to the team members, fostering a connection between guidance and authentic implementation. Savira acknowledges that achieving these practices may take time, and as a leader, patience is a crucial virtue to uphold, although she ensures that every team member acquires the same amount of learning and the team grows collectively. According to Langley and Tsoukas (2016), building relationships is a process which requires both time and patience, and it is in this patience that the key role of establishing the relational model of leadership as a source of both positivity and productivity lies. A workplace comprises a complex network of relationships and thus demands a relational leader to liaise with others at every step every day (Carter et al., 2015). As a leader, it is essential to demonstrate relational characteristics to the team, such as respectfulness, meaningful communication, and demonstrating integrity and competence, in order to foster relational trust (Anaru, 2023). This points to the importance of adopting a relational approach to leadership, as it maintains a congenial work culture and facilitates mutual benefits through learning from each other (Coleman, 2018). Relational leaders are willing and available to support and are open to conversations that can help them understand their team members and fellow leaders in a clearer way (Potter, 2020). Listening is an important

component to effective communication that enables a relational leader to collaborate by supporting others and getting support from others, thereby facilitating a cohesive team. Moreover, the mentorship of a relational leader, through effective communication, can provide the needed guidance and motivation for professional development of the team members; giving them a sense of job satisfaction, belongingness, and overall engagement (Waniganayake et al., 2017).

### **Empowering early childhood teachers through relational leadership**

According to Epitropaki et al. (2018), a relational model of leadership, beyond formal designation of a positional leader, is concentrated towards personal relationship building, mutual respect, collaboration and effective cooperation as it recognises the humanitarian and emotional aspect of understanding and influencing each other. Empowering teachers is a significant strategy for relational leaders. Savira mentioned that she thrives as a successful leader, drawing on past experiences of learning and contributing within her team. Guided by insights from her time as a team member and her expectations of leadership, she forges strong connections with her team. Expressing gratitude, offering encouragement, and fostering collaborative improvement, she ensures her team feels valued and empowered. In teacher leadership, collective decision-making acts as a key to strong teamwork and paves a pathway for new teachers to learn and hone their skills. Cooper (2014) outlines that empowering other teachers in the team to enable themselves to become leaders is important to the collaborative, contextualised, and community-based ethos of early childhood education. This commitment is driven by their values and beliefs and involves advocating for the education interests of the community.

Savira also talked about handling conflicts and understood that challenging situations were likely to occur when working in a team. She viewed them as valuable opportunities for team members to understand each other better and collaborate on finding solutions. As a leader, Savira prioritises being available for team communication, which helps resolve various issues and leads to collective decision-making. Potter (2020) emphasises that self-awareness is the fundamental trait that fosters the establishment and enhancement of relationships with fellow leaders, team members, and all individuals within one's leadership circumference. In conjunction, Cooper (2018) points out the complexity and intensity of relational leadership dynamics to develop reciprocal discernment among team members. On promoting open and honest communication within the team, Savira adds:

Whether it is our team planning meeting or on-floor, I keep my team members in the communication circle. Any situation is well discussed and contemplated within each other as equals, and being open to each other's feedback has been the key to maintaining transparency. As a leader, this helps me maintain relationships with my team members, thereby leading me to follow the relational model of leadership.

In early childhood settings, relational leadership can be supported by practices such as clear communication, regular team meetings, and opportunities for collaboration and professional development. Moreover, within a relational leadership framework, teachers assuming leadership roles can serve as mentors to their colleagues, fostering their development and providing support for their growth. This way the team becomes more cohesive and effective. Establishing relationships takes commitment, and it begins by getting to know each other, perhaps through various

learning opportunities, such as staff meetings, professional development, and on-floor communication (Biddle, 2012). However, Cooper (2018) argues that for ngā kaiako to grasp how their involvement in relational processes can help to enhance teaching and learning as a collective obligation, they need the chance to engage in conversations that go beyond casual conversation, align their intentions with practice, and recognise and investigate their own leadership actions. Through reflective dialogues and self-investigation, teachers can identify areas for growth and improvement, leading to a sense of ownership over their professional development. This process enables teachers to recognise their agency as leaders, empowering them to contribute their knowledge, expertise, and insights to shape the direction of their educational setting (Denee, 2018).

### **Conclusion**

At the heart of early childhood education lies the significance of relationships, and this article has shed light on the paramount importance of establishing, strengthening, and sustaining these connections within leadership to foster collegiality. Biddle (2012) beautifully captures this essence by stating that "the heartbeat of leadership is a relationship, not a person or a process" (p. 33). Relational leadership emerges as a successful and inclusive approach for early childhood education, nurturing meaningful connections and fostering effective teamwork. Embracing this approach empowers educators to create nurturing environments, benefiting every team member and yielding positive outcomes for all stakeholders.

The article delved into the on-floor practical experiences of a team leader, showcasing how relationships played a pivotal role in supporting her practice of cultivating a shared and positive team culture. Building trust, showing respect, and fostering transparency are key elements in forming meaningful relationships and promoting collaboration. As a result, the relational model of leadership flattens the hierarchical structures by emphasising the understanding of relationships and active engagement of followers. In doing so, it paves the way for a cohesive and harmonious team dynamic that elevates the overall effectiveness and success of the early childhood setting.

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