

Do you see what I see? Identifying, learning, and acknowledging own thinking as key to culturally responsive leadership.

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How we view a situation influences the actions that we take and ultimately the outcome that occurs. When faced with new situations where we do not know what to do, often we do more of what we have always done, informed by what we know (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Through a range of theories, including critical theory and transformative learning theory this article is a call to early childhood education leaders to critically reflect on the ‘what and why’ of leadership actions and the decision to lead from a culturally responsive perspective.

Introduction

The *Educational Leadership Capability Framework* (Education Council, 2018) outlines a set of core capabilities developed to guide leadership improvement and innovation in the education sector. Identified within the framework is the core leadership capability of “ensuring culturally responsive practice and understanding of Aotearoa New Zealand’s cultural heritage, using Te Tiriti o Waitangi as the foundation” (Education Council, 2018, p. 5). Signed in 1840 by Māori and the Crown, Māori understood Te Tiriti o Waitangi as awarding equal status and dual responsibility to work interdependently, maintaining the mana of each other (Berryman et al, 2018; Hohepa & Robinson, 2008). Underpinning the urgency of developing culturally responsive practice is the moral and ethical commitment to uphold the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. In ensuring culturally responsive practice, early childhood education leaders must demonstrate culturally responsive leadership. Rather than a specific approach, culturally responsive leadership requires critical examination of culture, paradigms, knowledge and systems to develop practices and structures that remove barriers and inequities reinforced by dominant cultural perspectives and Eurocentric systems of education (Hohepa, 2013; McGrath, 2008; Santamaria et al, 2014). The culturally responsive leader can be described as the leader that moves from respect of others and their culture to actively identifying how their own culture influences their thinking, acknowledging deficits and areas of development to work in active problem solving in cross-cultural partnership that resolve issues and build new ways of working together (Gutierrez, 2021; McNae & Barnard, 2021; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2016). The culturally responsive leader works to actively remove barriers and structures that maintain the status quo.

Critical theory

Identified as one of the theories that underpins *Te Whāriki He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa Early Childhood Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2017), critical theory is concerned with “challenging disparities, injustices, inequalities and perceived norms” (p. 62). How (2017) further explains that critical theory perspectives

challenge how cultural norms, systems and discourses have developed, the validity or truth of these, and how they can be reformed to create a fairer and more just society. A critical theory perspective challenges the early childhood education leader to consider the ‘what and why’ of their own leadership practice and how they can advocate and create environments that are socially just and equitable.

Transformative theory

Aligning with critical theory perspectives, Meizrow’s (2008) transformative theory highlights the importance of critical reflection in shifting and transforming existing schema, perspectives and mental models. Kitchenham (2008) describes transformative theory as the conscious reflection on what took place and examination of the assumptions, theories, and values that informed the actions taken. Although somewhat debunked due to its lack of consideration of context in the development of individual’s perspectives and schema, Meizrow’s transformative theory has value in the identification of the importance of critical reflection in shifting frames of reference and developing new understandings (Christie et al, 2015). Christie et al (2015) goes on to state that the intention of the theory was to “help individuals challenge the current assumptions on which they act and if they find them wanting to change them” (p. 11) leading to a more just society.

Identifying the barriers

We all see the world from our own perspective. Some of our perspectives will align with others, some will not. This is not new information; on some level we understand that we are all different. How we see the world is inextricably tied to who we are as individuals, our culture, language, experiences and context. Dominant culture can also influence perception and discourse used to describe experiences and events. Milne (2009) uses the metaphor of a colouring page to explain how the dominant culture sets the boundaries of where diversity sits, the white background represents the pervasiveness of the dominant culture, the lines on the colouring page determining what culturally responsive practice might look like implicitly erecting boundaries of where diversity can be placed. McIntosh (2003) suggests the image of an invisible backpack that contains the unconscious privilege that members of dominant culture carry. This privilege allows members of the dominant culture to access resources, opportunities and education that are restricted to others. This unconscious privilege is determined by membership of the dominant culture and the shared understanding and world views or cultural toolkit that informs each individual’s actions (Bruner, 1996 cited in Aitken & Kana, 2010). The intention in these metaphors is to prompt reflection of the influence of dominant discourse, cultures and ways of doing upon the everyday systems and actions that those from cultures other than the dominant encounter as barriers to participation. Further emphasised by Berryman and Lawrence (2017), critical reflection solely on practice is not enough, the culturally responsive leader must “reflect on the metaphors and theories that guide their practices, and if positioned within deficit discourses, reposition themselves within discourses that realize [sic] their own agency to make a difference” (p. 338). Leadership is inextricably influenced by culture and socially constructed, whether this is the culture of the individual, society or organisation (Dickson et al, 2003; English, 2008; Goh, 2009). As early childhood education leaders, we are influenced not only by our own individual cultures but the culture of education. Therefore, developing a deeper understanding of why we think what we think, and why we do what we do is important as it enables us to identify our assumptions, challenge the status quo, and make

informed decisions that best meet the needs of ākongā and whānau removing barriers to learning and participation.

Why we think what we think, why we do what we do

Culture has been defined as the widely shared beliefs, values, traditions, and ideologies that define one group of people from another (Hofstede, 2011). These ways of being and knowing are enculturated implicitly and explicitly in the individual and become the accepted and often unquestioned world view that inform every experience and interaction (Aitken & Kana, 2010; Dimmock & Walker, 2000; Goh, 2009; Hofstede, 2011). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory offers further explanation of the formation of the individual through a model of nested systems of family, community, society and time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Suggesting that the individual develops within the context of the environment that they are situated in. In a description of organisational culture, Schein (2010) explains that,

...culture is both a dynamic phenomenon that surrounds us at all times, being constantly enacted and created by our interactions with others, and shaped by leadership behavior, and a set of structures, routines, rules and norms that guide and constrain behavior (p. 1).

Another explanation for why we think the way we think and do the things we do, are the mental models or habits of mind that we hold. Mental models are developed over time through experiences, culture, language and interactions within the environment. Mental models are often unconsciously held assumptions that influence how an individual will read a situation and apply their understanding to inform actions or reactions, these understandings are automatic and occur almost instantaneously (Senge, 2006). Tied to mental models are the aspects of anchoring and confirmation bias, described by Kahneman et al (2011) as the weighing of information to fit held mental models and assumptions.

Culturally responsive leadership

Two actions that would support the development of culturally responsive leadership have been outlined below. Firstly, the importance of critical reflection has been discussed. Within the literature outlining culturally responsive leadership and practice, the importance of identifying the assumptions and mental models or habits of mind that inform actions is identified (Gutierrez, 2021; McIntosh, 2003; Rigby & Tredway, 2015; Samuels et al, 2017). Secondly developing an open to learning [OTL] leadership approach is introduced. Often what people do in practice is contrary to what they say they do, this can be described as espoused theories and actual theories or in use theories (Argyris & Schon, 1974). Theories in use underpin our actions, how we respond to problems and how we engage with others. OTL leaders draw on evidence, seek out other perspectives and are open to being proved wrong (Le Fevre et al, 2020).

Critical reflection - Critical self-reflection and understanding of how one's own culture and experiences influence thinking and action has been identified as a starting point for culturally responsive leadership (Gutierrez, 2021; Rigby & Tredway, 2015; Samuels et al, 2017). Over time leaders may develop habits of mind, following linear

processes to implementing solutions that resolve regularly occurring problems (Mintrop & Zumpe, 2019). The concern here is that these habits of mind and assumptions can restrict the ability of the leader to draw on a range of information and strategies to resolve more complex than complicated problems. Santamaria and Santamaria (2016) state that culturally responsive leaders “analyze why things are the way they are and how they can be remedied [through] innovations or change that will reverse or eradicate identified inequities toward overall improvement for all learners involved” (p. 5). A perspective shift requires the individual to become aware of how their personal identity informs their actions and can be achieved through critical thinking and reflection as well as active engagement with those different to themselves (Samuels et al, 2017; Thompson et al, 2017). Culturally responsive leadership requires the application of a critical lens to current ways of thinking, practices and systems to ensure access and equity, shift thinking and open up new learning opportunities and possibilities that were not previously visible (Spiller, 2015).

An open to learning approach - Robinson et al (2016) describes OTL leadership as leadership that balances the building and maintaining of relationships while concurrently engaging in the work of improvement. An OTL approach requires the positioning of self as a learner and leader, working alongside others in the team, and using methods such as observation, goal setting, and co-construction to support change and improvements (Berryman & Lawrence, 2017). An OTL approach to leadership supports the development of new learning, openly testing ideas and assumptions with the ultimate goal of improvement at the forefront (Bryk et al, 2015; Robinson, 2016). The value of respect within an OTL perspective considers others' views, values and knowledge, a culture of listening, seeking to understand and power sharing is demonstrated and individuals are valued as knowledgeable (Robinson, 2016). Leaders that keenly listen to the views and perspectives of others support the development of trust which in turn supports collective and collaborative problem solving (Cosner, 2009). Fostering a sense of ownership creates the expectation that the collective is committed and accountable to following through to productive action (Le Fevre et al, 2020).

Conclusion

Digging into the why and what that informs actions can be uncomfortable. We are all products of our environment, experiences and culture, this article has focused on the importance of identifying the ‘why’ that informs actions to shift thinking and practice toward culturally responsive practice and leadership. Rather than a destination, culturally responsive leadership is a journey which requires critical reflection, partnership, and adaptation of systems and structures to ensure that barriers are removed, and a socially just and inclusive environment is created for equitable participation of all ākongā and whānau.

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