

NEOLIBERALISM IN THE KINDERGARTEN SERVICE: DILEMMAS, TENSIONS AND CONSTRAINTS

CUSHLA SCRIVENS

*Department of Social and Policy Studies in Education
Massey University College of Education*

ABSTRACT *Since 1988, the kindergarten service in New Zealand has been involved in major restructuring changes. Senior teachers' in the service, who are mostly women, carry responsibilities for professional leadership. This paper, which reports on an exploratory qualitative study, investigates dilemmas, tensions and constraints for them in enacting their leadership in an increasingly neoliberal environment. It also explores their coping strategies.*

INTRODUCTION

The New Zealand kindergarten service employs registered early childhood teachers to provide sessional programmes for children over two and half years of age. Kindergarten Associations are administered by voluntary committees which employ general managers who hold the licence for the kindergartens. The associations also employ the senior teachers¹. Each senior teacher has professional responsibility for a group of kindergartens, the head teachers and teachers. Except in very small associations, these are non-teaching positions. Senior teachers are based at the Kindergarten Association headquarters and travel to the kindergartens.

The 1991 Budget brought in bulk funding of both operations and teachers' salaries for kindergartens. The implications of this move were that services would become self-managed and eventually self-funded and privatised. The right of kindergartens to charge fees, which was legislated for in 1992, and the devolution of responsibility to associations, meant that the government could stop funding kindergartens altogether if they wished. These changes were presented as bringing kindergartens into line with the rest of the early childhood services, which are bulk funded, and were justified on the grounds of equity and "neutral funding".

The advent of bulk funding and increased accountability has added to the senior teachers' workload with more administration and managerial work, and more time spent advising head teachers on the management change. Anthony Wilson and Ruth Houghton reported that

Senior teachers were seen as becoming more involved in association management through increased planning and policy development. In addition, the pressures felt by teaching staff were believed to have a flow on impact on senior teachers (1995, p. 32).

As management structures have become stronger, leaders and managers have reported increased tensions and greatly increased workloads within all early childhood settings (Dalli, 1993; Davidson, 1997; Mitchell, 1995; Wylie, 1993). This paper examines some of the effects of these changes on the work of kindergarten

senior teachers and explores the difficulties for them in enacting their leadership function. It is based on a qualitative study investigating leadership in the kindergarten service. The 1997 study was carried out in six Kindergarten Associations. Six senior teachers, their general managers, and some of the head teachers with whom they worked were interviewed. The data from the interviews are the basis for what follows.

THE NEOLIBERAL CONTEXT IN EDUCATION

In describing the New Public Management (NPM), Jonathan Boston (1996, pp. 18-19) distinguishes public choice theory and agency theory as principal influences on the reforms in education of the 1980s and 1990s. Both theories assume that individuals are rational, self-interested utility maximisers. Particularly relevant for policy and operations in the kindergarten service are the following beliefs underpinning these theories: a shift in accountability from input controls and bureaucratic procedures to outcome measures and performance targets; the devolution of management control coupled with the development of improved reporting, monitoring and accountability; the separation of policy and operations; and the development of strategic plans, performance agreements and mission statements, and a concern for corporate image.

Wylie (1995, p. 151) identifies "the application (at school level) of the model of separation of policy and operations" as of particular relevance to the education sector. In kindergartens, private, non-professional management structures were already in place before the reforms. However, *Before Five* (Lange, 1988), the foundation policy document for early childhood management, institutionalised this split. Successive governments have built on this, further separating professional leadership from management, and imposing on these structures an accountability system based on charters and quality funding.

Wylie (1995) also identifies a model of private sector management with devolution of control within the framework of the New Public Management. The model of management that the government has endorsed for kindergartens has all the characteristics of this. It is heavily dependent on charter mission statements, policy statements and management plans. Documentation is continuous, with policy being constantly revised and yearly management plans being written. Control and support at kindergarten level is the task of the senior teachers, and there is a strong demand for accountability expressed in their generic job description.

KINDERGARTEN LEADERSHIP IN A NEOLIBERAL CONTEXT

The senior teachers in this study believed a leader should: be a good communicator; share power; consult; support teachers; promote good teaching; be committed to children and the ethos of the service; and have a vision for the service.

These preferred characteristics are similar to those noted for women in educational leadership positions by Neville (1988), Shakeshaft (1989), Court (1994) and Hall (1996) in schools, and Rodd (1996) in early childhood. There is an emphasis on consultation and communication, on decision-making by agreement and on fostering relationships with those they work with. Leaders are seen as people who encourage empowerment, who understand the professional field and who are committed to a better deal for women and children. Leadership is also

seen in terms of support for the teaching staff, so they can do their job better. An emphasis on teaching, and on commitment to the philosophy of the organisation were more evident in the present research than they were in Rodd's study of directors of childcare centres (Rodd, 1996).

The question to be asked is how this desired consensual style fits in with the principles of New Public Management that are now part of early childhood, and kindergarten management systems. The sort of participatory, supportive leadership that these women are aiming for does not sit well with the attendant ideas of competition, choice and accountability.

DILEMMAS, TENSIONS AND CONSTRAINTS

Several researchers have identified dilemmas for educational leaders arising from the effects of neoliberalism (Blackmore, 1996; Grace, 1995; Strachan 1999; Woods, Jeffrey, Troman & Boyle 1997). Peter Woods et al. (1997) differentiate between *dilemmas*, where people have choice but the options are evenly balanced and can be resolved by professional action; *tensions*, where choice is limited, the effects are often personal, and the resolution is often strategic or political; and *constraints*, where the structure limits or negates choice. They point out that the same experience may have different outcomes for different people, but feel that there has been an increase in "the nature and source of dilemmas for teachers" (p. 15). They support Andy Hargreaves (1994) in asserting that the push to make educational institutions more like businesses has led to dilemmas for teachers. Included in these are concerns about the direction that teaching is taking, intensification of work and work overload.

Despite their commitment to leadership, the senior teachers in this research found that there were dilemmas, tensions and constraints in enacting their leadership in the ways that they wanted. The next section of this article will use the definitions of dilemmas, tensions and constraints, as developed by Woods et al. (1997), to frame the experiences of these women.

A Dilemma: Balancing the Changing Professional Workload

There are a number of factors that have contributed to the altered and increased workloads for teachers and administrators in early childhood (Mitchell, 1995) and also for kindergarten personnel (Wilson & Houghton, 1995; Wylie, 1993). These factors include: the advent of bulk funding; the Ministry of Education's accountabilities such as the nine plus twelve rule²; and the policy writing and related management plans that have arisen from Charter requirements and the *Revised Desirable Objectives and Practices* (Ministry of Education, 1996). Major changes include a wider range of responsibilities and increased marketing of kindergartens.

Jennifer reflected on the changes to the job since 1981 when she was previously a senior teacher. She said in reference to visiting the kindergartens she supported:

I was very much a resource and support person. The visits were not particularly in-depth but very much focussing on the good things that people were doing . . . But now, because of the level of compliance that kindergartens have to reach and maintain for funding and to do the jobs that they are to do, [these] have changed the nature of the job.

I mean kindergartens weren't licensed in 1981, they are now and we have to meet DOPs to get funding . . . I didn't have a management function or really a decision-making function. . . . More responsibility is being delegated now.

Other senior teachers confirmed that the work was now more varied. In addition to the 17 kindergartens and 46 full-time staff for which Christine provided support and professional development, she was on the following Kindergarten Association subcommittees: policy review, constitution review, finance, and advocacy and communication. With the advent of the *Revised Desirable Objectives and Practices* (Ministry of Education, 1996) the policy review committee for this Association was involved in updating policies that had not been revised since 1991. In addition, she had presented a series of lectures on the kindergarten movement at the College of Education, and was on the College of Education advisory committee.

Time to do such jobs successfully was seen by all of the senior teachers as being a problem. Although they worked long hours, with one or two evening meetings a week, they did not feel that they had time to do the job properly. Moreover, unlike the women in Helgeson's (1990) and Neville's (1988) studies, they did not find trivia easy to deal with. They complained about the incessant telephone calls and the mail. Although they felt that the other professional responsibilities were important, they considered that their direct involvement in visiting kindergartens and supporting staff, which they regarded as their main focus, suffered as a consequence of the extra work.

Two of the general managers had a different perspective, however. They saw senior teachers as part of management, and felt that if senior teachers increased their hours of work and gave up the extra weeks of kindergarten holidays, they would not feel that they were overworked. One said:

Well, I don't think that any of them are actually overworked. I think they are inefficient workers. I think that if they . . . used some of that quality time that you have in the term break to get on and do some of their preparation and planning, I think that there would be a lot less highs and lows.

This statement mirrors the reactions reported by Woods et al. (1997, p.7) where the "official answer is not to lighten the load, but to express concern that teachers are not working hard enough and to suggest lengthening the work day and week". Woods and his colleagues see this as part of the intensification of teaching life.

In addition to the increased workload, marketing was acknowledged as a new development for kindergartens. The main focus was on marketing the service to local and national organisations and to families. The increasing number of working women has reduced the need for sessional, rather than full day care and education. Kindergarten Associations were grappling with this. Senior teachers and general managers talked about the need for a "market image" which identified kindergartens as purveyors of a quality programme. Related to this was the issue of whether kindergartens should change their session times or be open for more sessions.

The women in this study perceived that marketing had become a major operation. Christine described her involvement with a marketing survey:

This year our focus has been with setting up this survey. It's based on interviews and there's been about 90 interviews. And they've been with targeted kindergartens within the Association . . . and also we interviewed a whole host of agency representatives, specifically early childhood people with the Ministry, the ECDU, Special Education Service and those types of agencies. And politicians and some community leaders, which have included GPs, Plunket Nurses . . . The purpose of this has been to develop a marketing strategy by ascertaining what people's perceptions are and what their knowledge base is about kindergartens.

Marketing was identified by the women in Strachan's (1999) research as a dilemma, because it introduced an element of competition into relationships between schools and this was not seen as desirable when collaboration was valued. The early childhood sector sees itself as valuing collaboration (Early Childhood Education Project, 1996; Kagan, 1994; Mitchell, 1995) and the time spent on marketing projects was consequently regarded rather uneasily by the women in this study. In addition, it took them away from a focus on learning and teaching.

A Tension: Support Versus Compliance and Accountability

There has been a shift from support to compliance and accountability in senior teachers' work. The Education Review Office (1997) publication *What counts as quality in kindergartens*, says that senior teachers fulfil two functions:

They provide advisory support and guidance to the teaching staff . . . (and) they also provide professional support and guidance to the employers. They report on the quality of the programmes being offered in the kindergartens . . . and are involved in staffing matters as the professional advisor. They help ensure that association policy is being implemented and legal requirements and contractual undertakings are being met. Senior teachers are, therefore, delegated the responsibility for the management of the education programmes delivered by kindergartens (p. 20).

The issue of support versus compliance and accountability was seen by this group of senior teachers as a tension as defined by Woods et al. (1997). Choice was limited by outside factors, such as the Ministry of Education's regulations. Resolution of this issue was not possible without role tension.

Both the senior teachers and the general managers discussed this issue at length. This is not a new discussion. The problem was identified by Anne Meade, when she reviewed the Senior Teacher Scheme in 1985 (Meade, 1985). However, the problem has become more difficult of late, as responsibilities have been more closely defined. The senior teachers in this group found it difficult to reconcile the roles of support to staff, and accountability to the Kindergarten Association implicit in the Educational Review Office (ERO) statement. They saw their role of supporting teachers being undermined by the requirement that they should report to the Kindergarten Association. Issues of confidentiality were seen as particularly important.

The visits that the senior teachers made to kindergartens included elements of both support and accountability. The senior teachers were also asked to monitor and report on matters to do with compliance, with health and safety issues, with the regulations and with follow up from Education Review Office visits. Margaret described one visit as follows:

I visited a kindergarten yesterday. Part of what I do is observing how the children interact and the flow and the layout and all that general stuff. How the teachers interact with each other and the parents, and safety issues and a whole range of things. So I make a report on that and make recommendations, perhaps on how things could be better managed . . . I guess that all of that is support for the teachers and it is also feedback for them.

Although Margaret saw this visit as support, it also had elements of compliance in the emphasis on health and safety issues and particularly in the report that is written and filed with the Kindergarten Association office. She has redefined support to include elements of compliance and accountability over which she has little control.

Her general manager, who worked closely with her in this small Association, viewed Margaret's visits similarly, and acknowledged that the redefinition of responsibilities was a tension for Margaret. She saw the ongoing tension within a wider context:

The feedback I'm getting from my board is that they're wanting more formal reports, on each kindergarten, on the staff, as opposed to the verbal reports we have relied on . . . [Margaret] wears a very difficult hat, where often she's seen as confidante of the teachers and they see her as a sounding board and speak to her on confidential matters. And she had the problem of, should that information be passed back to the Board because it could directly affect that teacher's performance, so I think that's a very difficult line for a senior teacher to work with.

The senior teachers in this study all asserted that the kindergarten staff saw the reports before they went any further and that so long as they were open with staff in what they wrote, it was legitimate to file this sort of report. However, opinions about whether they should be involved in reporting to the general manager on compliance and accountability matters varied. Brenda identified this as change in her role in the two years that she had been a senior teacher. Previously she had reported solely to the K4 senior teacher, now she was being asked to report on these matters directly to the general manager (who was the licensee). She felt concerned that this was an ethical dilemma for her. The general manager acknowledged the dilemma and expressed it as she saw it:

They are trying to be supportive of their staff but we are asking them to take some really firm management decisions. I would like to see them still provide professional support [but] I would like to see them reporting in detail. They report but it is wishy washy, it's got no substance to it.

This general manager also expressed her concern that the feedback in the written reports from her group of senior teachers often gave very little idea about whether there were quality programmes in the kindergartens. For some of the senior teachers in her Kindergarten Association, it seemed that the response to a request for accountability had been to provide general recommendations only. She maintained that the response to her request for more detail had been to say, "you employ a senior teacher team, that is enough".

While it was acknowledged that there could be a tension, confidence in the professionalism of the senior teacher was seen by the head teachers they worked with as transcending the demands that the Kindergarten Association put on them. For example, Jennifer's head teachers felt that they could rely on her to support them even though they were aware that she was reporting to the Kindergarten Association Board about them. Again, there was transparency in the process. The head teachers confirmed that Jennifer did not report on anything that she had not discussed with them first.

A Constraint: The Source of Power and Authority

The senior teachers also experienced constraints. These were situations in which they had little or no choice. One constraint was the source of power and authority.

The context for the senior teachers' relationships with the Association lies in the designated responsibilities of the general managers. All of the general managers were the licensees of the kindergartens, but the range of their responsibilities and accountabilities varied. For three of the larger Kindergarten Associations, the general manager was the representative of the Association, and the senior teacher team was responsible to that person rather than directly to the Association. For the other two Associations, the senior teacher teams were responsible directly to the Association. This devolution of control to a manager who had the interests of the Kindergarten Association Board foremost was seen as a constraint for the senior teachers working in these Associations.

There were differing perceptions among participants of the relationship between the Kindergarten Association and the senior teachers. These varied according to the job descriptions of the senior teachers and the delegated responsibilities of the general managers as described above. Concerning the division of responsibilities between her and the senior teacher, Margaret's general manager said:

[Margaret] would have the responsibility or authority to deal with issues with teachers and make recommendations . . . I do have more delegated responsibility for [the] maintenance side . . . I wouldn't see that I had more power than [Margaret] or I had power over her. I see us working in a joint relationship.

Margaret, who regularly attended Association Board meetings, was very aware of the perceptions of the staff and the problem that she faced. She commented:

[The teachers'] perception is that I am an extension of the Board. And I have to agree that at times, yes I am. And at times I feel very strongly that I am a teacher and I'm on their side, but it's very hard because I'm a party to all deliberations. I see where they're coming from on a financial basis . . . that bulk funding is difficult.

For other Kindergarten Associations, however, the role of the senior teacher was more clearly defined, though in some cases this had taken time to establish. Christine's general manager who had been in the job since 1995, and had begun with a large, well-established senior teacher team observed:

Senior teachers have to accept the fact that the reality of today is that they report to a manager, they don't report to parents. And the Council had to [learn to] say no, that is a matter for the general manager.

The head teachers, moreover, were all aware that in the final analysis the power lay with the general manager, principally because s/he was the licensee. A typical response was:

Even though she's an employee, she's the licensee. It gives her the responsibility and it certainly gives her the power . . . I don't know that the senior teachers have power . . . Maybe they do have . . . a sort of consultative power.

Dorothy, however, identified a difficulty concerning her responsibilities as senior teacher to the Kindergarten Association and her responsibilities to the teachers, but had no doubt about where she stood:

I see that [the Board's] responsibility is to make that decision and go with it and then I have to work with it, but I'm not going to agree with it . . . I have always made it clear to this Board here, ever since I have been in the job that I'm a teacher first. And I think for them that's a bit of a dilemma, because they see it as Dorothy is going to side with the teachers, it doesn't matter what.

All of these observations highlight a philosophical divide between the teaching profession and the Kindergarten Association Board. Both the senior teachers and the head teachers saw a necessity for teachers to be represented before the Board, who were not, in the main, regarded as sympathetic to the ideals of the kindergarten movement. But, whether the senior teacher had the power to represent the teachers was regarded as questionable. While this constraint in relationships with the Board is not new, the advent of bulk funding and the exclusion of kindergarten teachers from the State Service³ has given Boards more financial responsibility and more control over staffing and job contracts, thus weakening the senior teachers' position.

COPING STRATEGIES: A BALANCING ACT

The effects on education of neo-liberalism and the New Public Management have been discussed previously. Blackmore (1996) argues that for educational leaders, there is tension between the collaborative style that is regarded as appropriate, and the climate of competition and control that has developed. The dilemmas, tensions and constraints that were evident for this group of senior teachers mirror this finding. The enactment of their preferred leadership ways is thus overlain by the demands of neoliberalism and the New Public Management. The coping

strategies that these women exercised in order to lead in a way that fitted with their ideas about leadership will now be examined.

Both Blackmore (1996) and Strachan (1999) have investigated the ways in which feminist women leaders in schools cope in this kind of situation. Blackmore says that for her group the coping mechanisms were related to managing their own and others' emotions. She labels the reactions as resistance, controlling, distancing and exit. Strachan describes interconnected themes of resistance, agreement and appropriation. For Strachan, "resistance" includes speaking out on important issues, continuing to use "inclusive models of decision-making, despite the workload involved" and "resisting pressure to involve themselves in managerial task that took them away from what they personally and professionally enjoyed doing" (pp. 132-3). "Agreement" denoted agreeing with all or some of the philosophy of the reforms and acting accordingly; and "appropriation" conveyed the idea of using opportunities offered by the reforms to further their own agendas. Strachan also points out that different ways of behaving may have their origins in the women's different philosophies and personalities. The women in her study each had their own ways of keeping focussed on children.

All the senior teachers in this study described their commitment to children, support of teaching and learning, and affiliation to the kindergarten movement as important to their leadership. In addition, they were committed to a leadership style which included power-sharing and consultative leadership. Each of them was aware that trying to fulfil their leadership objectives meant a balancing act between their ideals and the demands of the Kindergarten Association and the Ministry of Education as expressed through the general manager. They were not asked to identify themselves as feminist, but there were elements of resistance, agreement and appropriation in their coping strategies.

Each achieved some sort of balance in coping, but in different ways. For example, Dorothy concentrated hard on supporting staff to the best of her ability. She saw herself as providing personal and professional support and representing the staff perspective to the Association. She portrayed herself as "a bolshie leader". Blackmore (1996) and Strachan (1999) would both regard her principal coping strategy as resistance. But there were elements of appropriation in her thoughts and actions too. She worked at understanding and acquainting herself with systems and ways of working in the new public management world. Christine, on the other hand, put emphasis on working within the senior teacher group where there was trust in the relationship. The strength of this group had made it possible so far to resist the demands of the Kindergarten Association that they should write detailed reports on kindergarten visits. Resistance was the keynote of her coping strategy. Nevertheless she worked long hours on marketing. Her stance here included elements of agreement with the managerial discourse of leadership.

For all of the women, their belief in their professional identity as teachers was a determining factor in their leadership. Their values and philosophy, their commitment to children and the strengths of their various personalities influenced the ways in which they wished to lead, and made it possible to cope with the dilemmas, tensions and constraints brought about by a shift to a neo liberal, managerialist system. They also worked best where their personal day-to-day culture allowed them to enact their ideas about consultation and communication.

CONCLUSION

This study places leadership in early childhood within the wider context of women in educational leadership. These women's ideas about the importance of leading by consultation and power-sharing, and their commitment to the promotion of good teaching through teacher support are found also in the literature on women's leadership in education. In addition, some of the effects of leading in a neoliberal environment, already documented for women in the primary and secondary sectors, are now documented for a group of women leaders in kindergartens. The tensions, dilemmas and constraints and the ways in which they cope parallel findings in other educational sectors. Further debate and research are needed within early childhood to establish whether ideas and behaviour similar to that of these women are widely established among professional leaders.

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¹ When this research was carried out (1997) job titles varied: some of the senior teachers were called "Managers of Professional Practice". For the purposes of this research the term 'senior teachers' has been used for all of the participants. Names of the participants have been changed for reasons of confidentiality.

² This is a Ministry of Education mechanism for ensuring that centres are not funded for children who are on the roll but not attending.

³ The Hon Trevor Mallard (Minister of Education) has proposed a return of kindergarten teachers to the State Service.