



Resolving leadership dilemmas in New Zealand kindergartens: an action research study

Carol Cardno

Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand, and

Bronwyn Reynolds

University of Tasmania, Launceston, Australia

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine dilemmas encountered by kindergarten head teachers with the further aim of developing their capability to recognise and resolve “leadership dilemmas”.

Design/methodology/approach – Action research was used to conduct a three-phase study involving 16 kindergarten head teachers and six system managers (within the Auckland region). A reconnaissance phase investigated the nature of perceived dilemmas and typical responses. In the second phase, an intervention that provided participants with both the theory and practice skills was implemented. A third phase of research evaluated the extent to which change had occurred.

Findings – The reconnaissance phase findings (pre-learning questionnaire) confirm the incidence of dilemmas in kindergarten settings. The data show that, while leaders could identify issues that signalled the presence of dilemmas, they were unable to articulate leadership dilemmas clearly or confront them successfully. A professional development intervention was evaluated using a post-learning questionnaire. There is evidence that these leaders were better able to recognise and articulate the leadership dilemmas they encountered in performance management settings. The findings show that participants are able to analyse their responses to these dilemmas by relating these to the theory base and indicating where they believe there is need for further learning. In summary, the intervention did change participants’ practice but the study is limited by its inability to gauge internalisation of learning and study its implementation. For this to occur another cycle of action research is required.

Originality/value – The paper is original in that it studies the practices of leaders in relation to resolving dilemmas which arise when leaders manage the performance of staff. If leaders have an understanding of the theory and skills they need to address these tension-laden problems, they could positively influence the quality of teaching and learning through leadership practices.

Keywords Leadership, Conflict resolution, Nursery education, Action research, New Zealand

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In the current context of central control of the future professional direction of early childhood education (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2002) strategies to improve the delivery of service and status of the occupation intersect with requirements for every early childhood teacher to have a three year Diploma qualification by the year 2012. In addition to initial teacher education becoming a compulsory requirement in the early childhood education sector, there is



considerable attention being paid to the performance management of teachers and Head Teachers against predetermined standards such as the recently promulgated *Professional Standards for Kindergarten Teachers* (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2005). Against this backdrop, issues related to the further development of leaders in early childhood settings are gaining prominence (Reynolds and Cardno, 2008) and, in relation to kindergartens in the greater Auckland area of New Zealand, this has led to specific initiatives. The Auckland Kindergarten Association (AKA) is the executive management body for the 107 kindergartens that currently operate under this umbrella organisation. New Zealand kindergartens cater for children aged between three and five years who attend half-day sessions up to five days a week. Since 2005, the AKA have been interested in an action research approach to develop the leadership and management skills of two tiers of leaders within this organisation: the head teachers who manage kindergartens and appraise teachers and the professional services managers (PSM) who manage the performance of the head teachers. This study outlines a project that aimed to understand the nature of a particular type of challenge these leaders experienced in relation to managing dilemmas along with providing appropriate leadership development. Both these aims were met within the process of action research which was jointly planned and implemented with the research participants.

In the context of this research, we use the term leadership to denote a formal, positional role accorded to a designated leader who must both manage (the systems and processes on a day to day basis) and lead (by influencing change and improvement). This does not mean that the principles and practices described in this study are limited to formal leaders, but it is these leaders who are deemed to be accountable for the quality of education that is provided in kindergartens because they are responsible for managing the performance of staff.

Leadership in early childhood settings has some unique characteristics because the majority of early childhood organisations are small units in comparison to most school and tertiary organisations and the overwhelming majority of teachers are women. Like other educational organisations, however, leadership in early childhood settings is spread from proprietor and executive management level (including PSMs in kindergartens) to leaders of learning (head teachers in kindergartens; centre managers in early childhood education and care centres) and beyond, to the teachers themselves and the wider community and stakeholders.

Another feature of early childhood settings is that women in early childhood leadership positions place considerable importance on communication and consultation to foster working relationships and decision-making by agreement (Scrivens, 2000). Given that a consensual management style is favoured, it is not surprising that leaders may be challenged when they wish to foster collaborative relationships with their colleagues without compromising expectations of accountability for the performance of others and the quality of educational provision. The literature confirms the value placed on the quality of programmes and clearly establishes links between effective leadership and the quality of service provision (Ebbeck and Waniganayake, 2003; Jorde-Bloom, 2003; Rodd, 2006). Furthermore, Ebbeck and Waniganayake highlight the importance of communication that enables leaders to deal with differing expectations and to facilitate the development of colleagues.

Dilemmas

It is universally appreciated that dilemmas are ever-present, dreaded and particularly complex problems that leaders encounter in organisational life (Cardno, 2001; Cuban, 2001; Dimmock, 1999; Hoy and Miskel, 2005; Murphy, 2007). Yet, the body of literature that deals with their characteristics in educational organisations provides some mixed messages in terms of labelling these dilemmas and suggesting possibilities that exist for dilemma resolution. Dilemmas are sometimes called organisational dilemmas (Dimmock, 1999; Hoy and Miskel, 2005) and are also identified as ethical dilemmas (Dempster and Berry, 2003; Cranston *et al.*, 2006). Murphy (2007, p. 60) asserts that, "Any dilemma involves both individuals and the school community as a whole". Within this panorama establishing the "dilemma" as one of the "difficult and messy experiential aspects of school leadership" (Murphy, 2007, p. 4), Cardno (1999, 2001, 2007) has alluded to a particular kind of dilemma: the "leadership dilemma". There are some crucial differences between these many views of dilemmas although there is evidence that leaders in educational organisations encounter all types.

A leadership dilemma arises in the context of performance appraisal and manifests as a tension between meeting the needs of the organisation and maintaining positive relationships with individuals. It is recognised as a dilemma for a leader who has responsibility for the performance of other staff. These formally positioned leaders:

... have the power to influence the learning-teaching environment for better or worse, thus they must take personal responsibility and own these dilemmas as they alone are in a position to directly lead change in both organisational and individual practice. This happens through face-to-face encounters that implicate them wholly in the success or otherwise of the resolution process (Cardno, 2007, pp. 33-34).

In their broadest organisational sense, dilemmas are always with us because "a dilemma arises when one is confronted with decision alternatives in which any choice sacrifices some valued objective in the interest of other objectives" Hoy and Miskel (2005, p. 421). Similarly, the messages relayed about ethical dilemmas contain concerns about the value clashes that leaders are confronted with in situations where they may not be able to satisfy the conflicting needs of the parties (Cranston *et al.*, 2006). While it is understood that dilemmas are inherently complex problems in which values are invariably in tension, and where we are challenged by choices, it is interesting to note that these definitions of dilemmas are usually accompanied by conclusions that the tension must be tolerated, and that to some extent compromise is inevitable.

Dealing with dilemmas

Educational leaders reading about organisational dilemmas are immediately alerted to the notion that they must make choices because one cannot satisfy the multiple, conflicting interests that characterise dilemmas. Cuban (2001, p. 16) is of the view that dilemmas cannot be solved, although he believes they can be managed – and conceptualises this management of dilemmas as a form of satisficing, which requires compromise and helps one to cope with the "debris of disappointment" that attends non-resolution as a consequence of repeated failure and associated guilt. Dimmock (1999) explains that while a problem may be solved, dilemmas are distinguishable from problems in that they are taken to be irresolvable because in attending to one element or horn of a dilemma, others are left unresolved.

In relation to ethical dilemmas, Dempster and Berry (2003) question the ability of school leaders to make decisions that are fraught with ethical difficulty. They refer to the complex nature of problems that may arise in relation to ethical decisions needing to be made about, for example, racism and sexuality issues. Their research reveals that, “increasingly, principals find themselves caught between local school management needs and priorities and centrally determined policy initiatives” (Dempster and Berry, 2003, p. 456). Cranston *et al.* (2006, p. 107) have also researched the nature of ethical dilemmas encountered by school principals and suggest that when situations “necessitate their choosing among competing sets of principles, values, beliefs or ideals, ethical dilemmas emerge”. Furthermore, these authors suggest that the preparation of educational leaders to deal with such value-laden ethical dilemmas is highly problematic.

In contrast with these somewhat pessimistic views about dealing with dilemmas that are organisational or ethical in nature, Cardno (2007) has suggested a productive approach drawing on the work of Argyris and Schön (1974, 1996). This alternative view suggests that it is both possible and imperative for leaders to resolve dilemmas to a point where they do not recur. Leadership effectiveness presupposes the ability to address these tough problems in such a way that they remain solved. Thus, in Cardno’s view, effective educational leaders make the following commitment. “They commit themselves to making a conscious choice to manage dilemmas and they commit themselves to learning and internalising a curriculum that embraces the theory and practice of managing leadership dilemmas” (Cardno, 2007, p. 37). In relation to kindergarten leaders, it is assumed that the research in the school sector is pertinent because leaders carry similar accountability for the performance and development of staff. Recent research (Reynolds and Cardno, 2008) that looks at the incidence and nature of dilemmas encountered by managers in early childhood education and care centres confirms that these managers encounter similar leadership dilemmas to those researched in school settings. This being the case, it is postulated that plans for leadership development in the early childhood sector could draw on a curriculum that provides theory and tools for productive conversations. Such resources have been applied to help leaders in schools manage dilemmas to resolution (Cardno, 2007).

Leadership development

While some of the literature questions possibilities for dilemmas to be managed to resolution (Cuban, 2001; Dimmock, 1999, Dimmock and Walker, 2005), other studies call for further research to determine forms of development that could enable leaders to cope with ethical dilemmas (see for example, Dempster and Berry, 2003; Cranston *et al.*, 2006). Murphy (2007) also offers insights into the sort of tools that could assist school principals to deal with dilemmas. One theme that runs through the literature, and is reinforced in the work of Owens (2004) is that leaders need to learn how to distinguish mere problems from dilemmas. For example, Cuban makes a distinction between “tame problems” which are familiar and frequent situations to which routine procedures and solutions can be applied as opposed to “wicked” problems. Wicked problems are “ill-defined, ambiguous, complex, interconnected situations packed with potential conflict” (Cuban, 2001, p. 10). According to Cuban these problems are actually dilemmas.

Another theme in the literature features a collaborative problem-solving approach to learning about dilemmas. Dempster and Berry (2003) have referred to the possibility of leaders participating in conversations about dilemmas in forums which are informal ethics learning co-operatives. Cranston *et al.* (2006, p. 117) allude in their study to the inclusion of others in decision making related to ethical dilemmas and state, “It appears that sharing the dilemmas helped the leaders to deal more effectively with the ethical dilemmas”. Murphy (2007, p. 81) has suggested that, “It is often in the nature of a school-based dilemma that all involved must participate in the analysis and the solution, if they are to learn about themselves and the others involved”.

Drawing on the work of Argyris (1985, 1990, 1993, 1995, 2000) and Argyris and Schön (1974, 1996), Cardno (1999, 2007) has been advocating for a type of leadership learning that is specifically designed to make the sources and characteristics of the leadership dilemma clear. It embraces a curriculum for learning that uncovers the theories of action that guide our thinking and practice, and makes it possible to include new ways of theorising and acting when leadership dilemmas are encountered. She states that despite contrary views such dilemmas can be managed to an effective resolution:

But this can only occur when a leader learns how to approach the management of dilemmas in a productive way. This requires the meshing both before and during action of a high degree of theorising about the problem with a self-critique that is both cognitively and emotionally demanding whilst the action is occurring. This is the praxis of dilemma management. Each time a leader embarks on the process of managing a dilemma, and in every encounter between the leader and others, there is praxis as the theory of learning associated with managing leadership dilemmas interacts with the practice in a reciprocal way (Cardno, 2007, p. 34).

Cardno’s curriculum for dilemma management involves dimensions that are intellectual, emotional, practical and theoretical. It is sequential and very demanding as each component step in the learning experience builds on knowledge and skills that are incrementally gained. This type of learning takes time to be internalised and is offered as a basis for on-going leadership development focused on resolving dilemmas. About this curriculum, she states:

Leaders need recourse to intellectual resources in order to manage leadership dilemmas. These include familiarity with a specific theory base and development of a set of skills related to productive reasoning. This curriculum can be described as having the following components:

- Confronting the dilemma
- Overcoming avoidance and attempting resolution
- Learning the skills of productive reasoning
- Using the skills – reflection-in-action
- Creating a dilemma management culture (Cardno, 2007, p. 43).

In the “Confronting the dilemma” step, the emphasis is on recognising the leadership dilemma as a particularly challenging problem which needs a particular set of skills to be brought into play. For some people, every problem is a dilemma, but they may not realise that certain characteristics render dilemmas more difficult to deal with than simple problems that lend themselves to rational forms of problem-solving (Owens,

2004). If a dilemma cannot be recognised or clearly articulated with attention to its many constraints (Robinson, 1993; Robinson and Lai, 2006) it is unlikely that it will be confronted because of a natural tendency to avoid such messy, conflicted problems.

In the “Overcoming avoidance and attempting resolution” component, this curriculum requires the understanding of several levels of theory such as the mental models (Senge, 1990) that predispose one towards a defensive or productive stance along with the theory of action approach that allows people to discover and alter their practice (Argyris and Schön, 1974). Because reasoning and action are guided by a theory of action – a mental master programme that is either defensive or productive – this theory learning is essential to understand why dilemmas are avoided rather than confronted. Argyris and Schön (1974, 1996) and Argyris (1990, 2000) have provided the resources for people in organisations to learn how to be productive.

“Learning the skills of productive reasoning” is the most challenging part of the curriculum as it focuses on intrapersonal and interpersonal learning. Intrapersonal, because learners have to become aware of how their theories of action (espoused or stated and theory-in-use which is observable behaviour) are implemented, especially in conditions that are demanding and stressful. It demands learning about self at a very deep level within the learning process. Argyris and Schön (1974) have termed learning associated with recognising a defensive approach single-loop learning in which the guiding values of winning, controlling and protecting self and others are dominant in one’s theory-in-use, even when the actions are changed in the course of repeated failure to achieve a unilateral and predetermined solution. To break out of this loop requires a form of praxis based on implementing a new theory-in-use leading not only to different actions but different actions guided by an alternative set of values – those of providing and receiving honest feedback that is evidence-based, negotiating solutions jointly and both parties making a commitment to monitoring these solutions. This double-loop learning requires an understanding of and theorising about reflection – and what it really means to be a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983) by engaging in reflection-in-action while in the midst of conducting a productive dialogue.

The component that involves “Using the skills – reflection-in-action” anticipates that leaders will apply theory resources in practice situations and will adopt a productive theory of action with the ability to reflect-in-action (Schön, 1983), and self-correct their practice when it shows evidence of single-loop learning and a return to a defensive theory of action. This form of reflection goes beyond the simple requirements of reflection-on-action (in hindsight). In order to reflect-in-action one has to bring reasoning informed by theory to bear on the action while in the throes of carrying out that action. This is exactly what leadership dilemma resolution skill demands.

This curriculum (Cardno, 2007) is somewhat idealistic in suggesting that learning might include a focus on “Developing a dilemma management culture” within an organisation. On the premise that the notion of organisational culture is closely related to the way in which an organisation or group goes about solving its problems (Schein, 2004), it suggests that leaders could model a way in which the cultural norms can be changed so that it becomes the norm to confront and address dilemmas in a mutually satisfying way for all concerned. For dilemma management to become embedded in the way the organisation attends to complex problems it needs to be communicated as both a theory and a set of skills to all members of the organisation.

With a rich literature that paves the way to possibilities for resolving leadership dilemmas, the researchers in this study set out to both investigate and improve the practice of kindergarten leaders within the Auckland region.

Methodology

The action research approach adopted for this study draws on a form of developmental action research (Cardno, 2003) as depicted in Figure 1.

Action research phases

This process model involves reconnaissance, intervention and evaluation phases underpinned by principles of collaboration and critique. The collaboration extends to the joint planning and implementation of the project. The critique aspect draws on the learning resources provided by action science (Argyris, 1995; Argyris *et al.*, 1985; Friedman, 2001) and problem-based methodology (Robinson, 1993). This enabled participants in the project to engage with their theories of action at a deeply intrapersonal level, before attempting a particular type of collaborative activity employing productive conversations, to confront and ultimately attempt to resolve leadership dilemmas. Friedman (2001, p. 160) states that, “The goal of action science inquiry is to help practitioners discover the tacit choices they have made about their perceptions of reality, about their goals and about their strategies for achieving them”. He goes on to say, “If people can find the sources of ineffectiveness in their own reasoning and behaviour, or their own causal responsibility, they then possess some leverage for producing change” (Friedman, 2001, p. 160). These fundamental assumptions of action science are the very same as those related to a theory of action approach adopted for resolving dilemmas, hence there is a most apt confluence of ideas and intent when action science and dilemma resolution are aligned in an action research project.

Action research process

In this study a group of 16 kindergarten head teachers and six kindergarten professional services managers (PSM) agreed to participate in a year long project. The

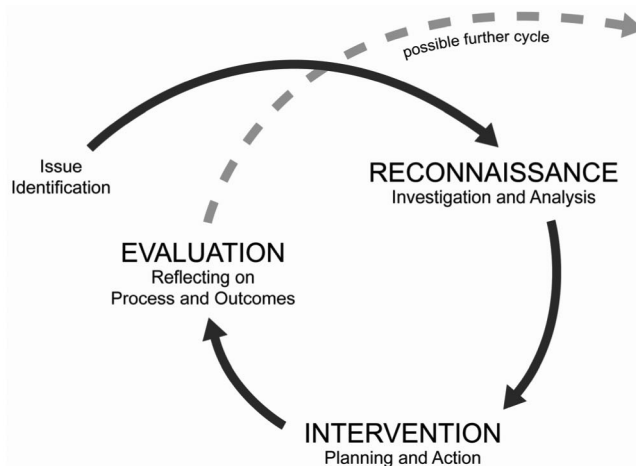


Figure 1.
Action research phases

participants were invited to take part by the Auckland Kindergarten Association (AKA) executive who, in consultation with the researchers agreed on a general plan for the research process. This involved data gathering to inform a first (reconnaissance) phase of research, followed by an intervention that would provide a targeted professional development event (with a built-in evaluation component), followed six-months later by a further formal evaluation to establish the extent to which change strategies had been implemented and learning related to dilemma management and resolution had been internalised.

The project began with a meeting of the 22 participants in November 2006 during which an open-ended questionnaire was administered seeking answers to the following reconnaissance phase research questions. This was designed to investigate the status quo prior to any learning about dilemmas and their resolution taking place.

RQ1. What is the incidence and nature of dilemmas encountered by kindergarten leaders?

RQ2. Do kindergarten leaders recognise “leadership dilemmas” and how do they respond to these?

RQ3. What challenges do these dilemmas pose for kindergarten leaders?

There was a 100 per cent response to this (pre-learning) questionnaire because it was administered to the whole group who were given 45 minutes to respond in writing during the meeting. The findings from this questionnaire, and the theory-base associated with leadership dilemmas (Argyris and Schön, 1974, 1996; Cardno, 1999, 2001, 2007) informed the nature of an intervention event held in February 2007 which constituted a second phase in the research process. This intervention involved a two-day intensive learning (professional development) programme which introduced participants to the theory and practice associated with dilemma resolution.

The final phase of the research involved an evaluation: immediately after the professional development programme using a feedback form, and subsequently at a further meeting of the whole group in June 2007. At this meeting, which was arranged for participants to share learning and practice progress with one another, a second (post-learning) questionnaire was administered to the 17 participants (11 head teachers and six managers) who attended and 15 were returned. Questionnaires were mailed out to the remaining five head teachers who had participated in the intervention programme. Only one questionnaire was returned. Hence, in total, 16 out of 22 questionnaires were responded to. The research questions that guided the evaluation phase were as follows:

RQ4. How did the intervention assist leadership dilemma recognition and attitudes to dealing with such dilemmas?

RQ5. What creates barriers to the resolution of leadership dilemmas in practice?

RQ6. What further leadership development is needed to overcome these barriers?

RQ7. What problems could a next cycle of action research address?

Throughout the research process, the researchers and participants used group meetings as an opportunity for collecting data and for providing feedback to

participants on the findings and the process as it unfolded. At a final meeting in June 2007 with the AKA executive and some of the professional service managers, plans were made to engage in a second cycle of action research. The aim of this second cycle was to deepen learning for those who had participated in the intervention. This has not yet happened.

Findings of the reconnaissance phase

There is no doubt that dilemmas exist and challenge leaders in kindergartens. In fact, the researchers were surprised at the initiation stage of the project by the high level of interest shown by participants in the topic of the research. Even though at this early stage they were not clear about the nature of these very challenging problems, they had an instinctive group view that some of their “really curly problems” were indeed dilemmas.

The incidence and nature of dilemmas revealed in the data

The findings of the study, in relation to issues that were extremely challenging for kindergarten leaders, posed few surprises in terms of the nature of the tensions that made them particularly challenging. Lack of time and issues related to time and workload management were strongly represented.

Participants also identified issues that arose out of managing relationships with their team, with teachers and the community. These findings are summarised under two main categories of issues that underpin dilemmas in Table I. It is notable that not one respondent related either the time or relationship issues to the notion of performance and its management.

The majority of participants expressed very similar views regarding the characteristics of problems that alerted them to the presence of a dilemma. These characteristics were:

- *Uncertainty.* The problem left them “unsure of the implications”; “unsure about how to proceed” and “unsure of how I would deal with this”.
- *Tensions.* These problems had within them the “mismatch of ideas” and “different views”.

Time and workload	Relationships
Just not enough time to complete all tasks	Relationships between team members can be difficult to manage
Constant juggling needed with priorities	Different personalities of staff create clashes
Workload has grown – many new responsibilities	As the leader, being a team member and also being the Head Teacher is a hard thing
Administration takes up a great deal of time	Managing a relationship with a difficult staff member is really challenging
Hard to delegate to others in the team – they resist	There are difficult community relationships sometimes
Time management skills needed	Relationships with difficult parents cause stress
Multi-tasking is exhausting	When there are different teaching values there is often disagreement
Major challenge is focusing on work with children when expected to also manage adults	Staff can be resistant to Head Teacher decisions

Table I.
Two main categories of dilemma issues

- *No single solution*, They were aware that their decision-making contained “various options” and that the solution they chose “may not have a satisfactory outcome for everyone”.
- *Magnitude of problem*. These were undoubtedly viewed as “big problems”, “something rather major”.
- *Guidance needed*. Because these were not viewed as ordinary, everyday problems, more than half of the participants expressed a general feeling that such problems needed clarification and they would “need help from others”.

These findings are extremely consistent with studies that report the nature of dilemmas in general (for example see Cuban, 2001; Murphy, 2007) and the feelings of tension, uncertainty and confusion that are associated with their complexity. It is notable that the key characteristics of a “leadership dilemma”, namely its recurrence and its tension being associated with meeting organisational versus individual needs is unstated.

Incidence of the “leadership dilemma”

With further probing and provision of a definition of the “leadership dilemma”, all but two of the participants (20/22) indicated that they could recognise the main features of a “leadership dilemma” in some of the very difficult problems that arose for them as leaders. The definition provided was as follows:

A leadership dilemma is a particularly complex problem because it contains tensions between what serves the organisation best and what is best for your relationship with the individual involved. In other words you are torn between on the one hand, meeting the needs of the organisation and, on the other hand, meeting the needs of the individual (Question 4: Kindergarten Leaders (pre-learning) Questionnaire).

Participants were asked if they could relate to this definition and provide examples. In all instances the examples provided involved the leader’s interactions with other people and in most cases this interaction had some connection with the performance of a staff member. The nature of the leadership dilemmas described in these prompted examples have been summarised in two broad ways as follows:

(1) *Performance:*

- teacher not meeting professional expectations (e.g. Concerns about punctuality, diligence, attitudes);
- team member letting the side down; and
- head teacher unable to deal with being a team player and a leader when colleagues did not meet expectations.

(2) *Value clashes:*

- two teachers unable to agree on standards (related to behaviour of children and/or pedagogy) because of differing beliefs; and
- teacher failing to agree with head teacher’s pedagogical philosophy.

Although the participants provided examples that resonated with the way leadership dilemmas are described in school settings (Cardno, 2007) none of the respondents were

able to articulate the dilemma to isolate the tension between organisational needs on the one hand and the need to maintain positive relationships on the other hand.

Responses to the leadership dilemma

Participants described a variety of responses to dilemmas which we have analysed to reveal three distinct approaches to confronting a dilemma: a direct approach; an indirect approach; and an approach that involved preparation. This summary is contained in Table II.

Successful solutions and further challenges

Asked about the success of these responses to resolving leadership dilemmas, eight of the 20 participants who responded to the question indicated that they had been successful. However, an analysis of some of the statements made reveals that the problem they report success with may not have been a leadership dilemma in the first place.

One participant says:

No problems since the new system has been put into place.

This respondent is referring to a problem related to arrangements for staff leave. Her comment about a system providing the solution reveals that the nature of the problem did not meet the characteristics of a leadership dilemma. While it might possibly have been an organisational dilemma, it was more likely to have been the sort of problem that rational decision-making could resolve by employing a change to a system or process.

Another participant stated:

As a group we made the right decision.

The problem this respondent is referring to is related to disagreement within the team about introducing a teaching innovation. Again, our interpretation of this response indicates that it was not a problem that challenged a defensive theory of action and

Approaches identified	Examples of the approach
Direct approach	Talking to the people concerned Being courageous, facing conflict or potential conflict Talking and recording the conversation(s) by taking notes Being honest, up-front and asking for their opinions and sharing mine
Indirect approach	Providing clarification of policy related to the problem Changing the system Backing off (even on thinking about things that need to be implemented) Writing up a communication policy as a team Reviewing policy to sort the problem in a round-about way
Preparation approach	Gut feeling that this is a big problem and needs me to prepare by consulting others Calling on a colleague or PSM to discuss the problem Seeking outside advice from a knowledgeable person Thinking scenarios through by myself

Table II.
Approaches to resolving
leadership dilemmas

hence a collaborative solution was possible, which also indicates that this was not a leadership dilemma.

Asked about the less successful attempts to resolve dilemmas, and the sort of challenges these posed when efforts were unsuccessful, participants had this to say in relation to partial success:

The kindergarten problem was solved, but staff relationships suffered.

I coped quite well but I was the person more stressed.

I think I handled the situation as best I could.

It seems to be working but still has a way to go.

We predict that the problems underlying such partial efforts of success have some of the characteristics of dilemmas in that there is polarisation regarding either meeting the needs of the organisation or maintaining positive relationships (Cardno, 2001), or that there is a degree of satisficing (Cuban, 2001).

There were also comments about lack of success, such as:

I know I should have nipped things in the bud.

I would have liked to be more direct. It was uncomfortable.

The attempt to resolve the dilemma just made the situation bearable but the problem remains.

These responses reflect the research base that is well established in terms of dilemma recognition, awareness of the complex nature of such problems, and their tendency to recur if not resolved. This wealth of research into the nature of dilemmas and the inability of leaders to resolve them without recourse to the specific learning associated with theories of action is well documented in relation to both school and corporate organisations (Argyris and Schön, 1996; Cardno, 2001, 2007). Participants in this study indicated that they were challenged by dilemmas and that what they wanted was professional development that targeted “the hard stuff – dealing with people”, and “Some skills of how to identify dilemmas” and “How to deal practically with dilemmas and have a support system”. One participant summed up the view that while problems were familiar, the notion of dilemmas and their management was not and stated, “I would like to know more about how to resolve dilemmas. I don’t think I have ever read anything about resolving dilemmas other than discussion, openness etc.” In short, the findings confirmed hunches that both participants and researchers had wanted to test in this first phase of the action research project. While dilemmas were generally recognised, the leadership dilemma could not be articulated. Furthermore, participants were extremely challenged by these problems and were willing to participate in professional development related to dilemma resolution.

Intervention: learning how to resolve dilemmas

The researchers in this project were familiar with the curriculum for dilemma management (Cardno, 1999, 2007) which has been used successfully for over a decade with school leaders to develop their capacity to understand, manage and resolve dilemmas. The findings of the reconnaissance phase confirmed that this curriculum was appropriate for the development of kindergarten leaders. This set of

reconnaissance findings was communicated to members of the AKA executive team. The researchers shared their knowledge of the sort of curriculum for learning about dilemma resolution that could be mounted as a two-day professional development programme. All 22 participants who completed the pre-learning questionnaire were invited to attend. The researchers acted in the role of facilitators of learning. As facilitators their aim was to create a relevant and trusting learning environment in which the participants were able to relate to data they had provided themselves in the reconnaissance phase. In order to build trust between themselves and the participants, the researchers took care to check assumptions and make clear to the participants the objectives and content of the professional development event before participation (Martin, 2001). As facilitators of learning they had to be credible in relation to presenting both the theory and practice of dealing with dilemmas in early childhood education settings and cover a large curriculum in a short time. This is identified as one of the constraints related to large-group intervention events in action research (Martin, 2001), as opposed to the on-going consultancy relationship that develops between a researcher and participants in small-group “community of inquiry within a community of practice” interventions within one organisation (Friedman, 2001).

The resources for critical inquiry about practice that fails to resolve leadership dilemmas were drawn from what Argyris *et al.* (1985) call an action science approach, and what Robinson (1993) terms problem-based methodology. Briefly, this approach challenges learners to uncover and critique a defensive theory of action that could act as a barrier to being productive in efforts to resolve dilemmas.

Evaluation of the intervention

The intervention was conducted in February 2007 and four months later a post-learning questionnaire was used to collect data about the extent to which the dilemma management curriculum had been internalised and used to frame action taken in relation to attempts to resolve a dilemma. Findings from this data collection event have been organised to reflect the key components of the dilemma management curriculum (Cardno, 2007).

Confronting the dilemma

As Cardno (2007, p. 43) states:

Having recognised (and owned) a dilemma, a leader must then be able to acknowledge it and make a commitment to confronting it.

A measure of the success of the intervention would clearly be the extent to which participants could recognise and articulate dilemmas as a consequence of new theory learning. The findings show that participants were able to be far more specific in their articulation of the nature of leadership dilemmas at this stage of the action research project than they had been at the outset. All 16 respondents (comprising ten head teachers and six managers) identified a leadership dilemma they had recently encountered as being related to the performance of a staff member. In addition, a quarter of the respondents specified that relationship tensions were part of the problem.

One respondent stated:

The recent dilemma was related to staff performance and the different expectations that we both had and a feeling that no one was going to back down.

The characteristics of a leadership dilemma that had alerted them to the complexity of the problem: namely, its recurring nature and persistence were clearly articulated by the majority of participants. This indicates that they were able to recognise the leadership dilemma as a precursor to its confrontation. Examples of this articulation are provided below and differ greatly from the very general characteristics proposed by participants in the reconnaissance phase of this project.

Participants recognise the leadership dilemma because:

The dilemma was identified because it had been occurring in different guises over and over again.

When it kept recurring even after we had discussed the dilemma and decided upon what we would do to solve it as a team. Things would go along OK for a while then it would resurface and we would again go through the process.

There was no easy solution and I was stuck between two difficult solutions, one being ignoring the problem (no good!) and the second being opening up a dialogue with the person concerned and airing my feelings in order to move forward.

Confronting a dilemma involves “moving out of a comfort zone into extremely risky or even dangerous ground” (Cardno, 2007, p. 44). This concern features in many of the responses from participants in relation to why a leadership dilemma was often avoided in spite of these being recognised.

Overcoming avoidance and attempting resolution

We know from research in other settings that these challenging problems overwhelm leaders to the point where the dilemma is either avoided or is polarised. In a polarised approach either the organisational or the individual-relationship issues are addressed singly and invariably both sets of needs cannot be met. In this phase of the study, the participants revealed views about avoidance that are sharper and more self-aware than those provided in the reconnaissance phase (pre-learning questionnaire) responses. Participants have identified aspects of avoidance that have been categorised as related to concerns about others, and concerns about self.

A typical dilemma avoidance response is related to a wish to protect relationships at the cost of meeting organisational goals. One respondent stated:

What stops me is the risk of offending others and breaking down relationships. We are a very small team of three. We need to, and do depend on each other and need to maintain positive relationships.

And another refers to both her concern for others and things she fears about herself:

Fear of upsetting someone. I ask myself, am I being too hard – setting too high standards. Have I got it right?

Fear of upsetting others is usually accompanied by a fear of threat or embarrassment to oneself, both of which are dominant values in a defensive approach that leads to avoidance in relation to dealing with a dilemma. This feature is commonly identified in other studies of how leaders deal with dilemmas (Argyris, 1990, Cardno, 2007) as the main barrier to leaders' developing courage to confront a dilemma. When leaders' self-awareness of this tendency is heightened, so is their capacity to attempt resolution.

The participants in this study were able to identify defensive tendencies in their normal responses to dilemmas after the intervention. They were not able to label or pinpoint their defensiveness in the reconnaissance phase data to the extent observable in the evaluation phase data. This, we believe, is directly attributable to the understandings they would have gained about defensive approaches as a consequence of new learning in the professional development programme. Participants' statements below reveal their awareness of defensive responses in themselves and others:

This could threaten a relationship I have nurtured and enjoyed and the fact that the relationship will no longer be on a "friends" footing.

I have these emotional feelings, e.g. defensive, angry, blaming. Trying to get my point across. I find myself backing down – letting the excuses win – putting off the discussion and hoping it will resolve itself.

My own fear of conflict and the defensiveness of the person I am attempting to open a dialogue with.

Learning and using the skills

The intervention introduced the participants to the theory of productive reasoning and the practice of productive dialogue as a means for resolving dilemmas. Dilemma management concepts were taught using a theory of action approach (Argyris and Schön, 1974) in which participants were introduced to the components of defensive and productive theories-in-use and learned to identify these in their own efforts to become double-loop learners.

In order to put the theory into practice, a form of praxis must occur. As leaders attempt to use a new set of skills, such as the Triple I Approach (Cardno, 2001) which promotes the generation of information, illustration and inquiry, they need to recall the theory and then use it to inform action choices. They also need to be able to correct action as it is happening (by slowing down or stopping in order to reflect-in-action) on the basis of theory knowledge while they are engaged in productive dialogue.

We asked participants to tell us how the learning from the intervention had led to such praxis. The participants reported instances of reflection-in-action, changed practice and continuing challenges as follows:

For me it was a matter of slowing down and recalling what I was trying to resolve without getting caught up in the arguments of the other. All the time remembering to check the others' views and emotions. Allowing silences in the conversation. So the impact was that I felt confident and able to attempt to resolve the dilemma. I had "tools" through theory to do this and I referred back to these while in discussion.

The theory gives strength to what you need to do. It helps clarify the situation – gives guidelines and a way of tackling dilemmas.

Putting the theory into practice is always a lot harder in reality as emotions are involved. People don't want to hurt feelings and also knowing that if the situation doesn't turn out positively you still have to work alongside that staff member. Often the action doesn't quite work with the dilemma and it backfires.

Creating a dilemma management culture

Embedding a non-avoidance dilemma resolution approach within the culture of kindergartens and kindergarten leadership will take time and on-going engagement with the associated theory and practice. Three quarters of the participants in the evaluation phase of this project asserted strongly that they needed time and opportunity to practice things learnt in the intervention. One third commented that all the teachers in a kindergarten needed insights about dilemmas and the skills to resolve them. One participant stated that, “The whole organisation of AKA need to have training in resolving dilemmas respectfully”. One of the ways in which the kindergarten culture can embrace the value of resolving leadership dilemmas is by giving this form of professional development high status. Calls from participants for “on-going training workshops”, “leadership dilemma training for all managers”, “mentoring of progress”, and “lots more dialogue about dilemmas” are consistent with research in the school sector (Cardno, 2007) that confirms a need to build cultures that foster productive dialogue about and praxis for dilemma resolution.

Discussion and conclusions

In this action research study we set out to examine the incidence of “leadership dilemmas” in kindergarten settings, based on the assumption that the findings of research on schools and corporate organisations revealing the existence of such dilemmas would be confirmed. This was indeed the case and, furthermore, because the study contained within its phases an intervention to strengthen the ability of kindergarten leaders to resolve this kind of dilemma, we are able to extend the findings beyond investigation to shed light on how improvement might be brought about in the arena of resolving leadership dilemmas. This discussion is structured to answer the four research questions formulated to evaluate the impact of the intervention.

How did the intervention assist leadership dilemma recognition and attitudes to dealing with such dilemmas?

We contend that the intervention gave participants confidence to deal with important concerns that had often in the past been set aside. As one participant stated, “If a true leadership dilemma occurs I feel confident about ‘having a go’ to apply these skills”. Kindergarten leaders in this study did not want to avoid dealing with leadership dilemmas. They realise the imperative of needing to solve problems that have a direct bearing on the educational experiences of children. The following participant statement exemplifies this stance: “I certainly will continue to use these skills so the team can move forward as one for the benefit of the children and the kindergarten community”. The importance of urging the resolution of these complex problems lies in the very nature of a leadership dilemma and its emergence in the context of performance appraisal. This is borne out by the participants in this study and confirmed in the related literature base. The imperative to focus on the performance of staff is central to the core task of an educational leader, namely: the leadership of learning. Because the leadership dilemma arises in this context, its resolution is thus one of the most fundamental challenges a leader faces in relation to influencing the quality of learning and teaching – a task variously termed educational leadership, instructional leadership or curriculum leadership (Cardno and Collett, 2004). While we know that educational leaders do not directly affect student learning outcomes

(Mulford, 2007) except in very small schools (Southworth, 2004), we also know that the indirect effect of leadership is about creating conditions for improved learning outcomes (Robinson, 2006, 2007; Letithwood *et al.*, 2004). The exact nature of the “educational leadership” practices needed to create these conditions remains the challenge for future research. Leithwood *et al.* (2004, p. 14) assert that research needs to provide us with more “fine-grained understandings than we currently have of successful leadership practices.” Robinson (2007, p. 22) states:

This literature connects educational leadership to its core business of teaching and learning and these connections need to be substantially strengthened if leadership literature is to deliver more reliable and more useful insights into the particular leadership practices that create the conditions that enable teachers to make a bigger difference to their students.

We contend that one of the most critical connections for educational leaders to recognise and act on is the imperative to effectively resolve those problems that lie in the way of the delivery of quality teaching and the experience of quality learning for students. This means that teachers should be the focus of activity. This is certainly the case in Starratt’s (2003, p. 11) view when he states:

I believe that the core work of school leaders must be involved with teachers in seeking to promote quality learning for all children, and that all management tasks serve that core work.

Drilling down even deeper brings to light the leadership dilemmas that are strewn like boulders in the pathway of building relationships that work for the advancement of rather than the stagnation of learning. Only if these deep-seated problems are revealed can leaders focus on the practices that might have the greatest indirect educational leadership effect. The immense challenge lies in uncovering the ineffective practices of leaders in the pursuit of moving towards effectiveness. This demands change of great magnitude in individuals, teams and organisations. We believe that the intervention in this study has gone some way towards enlightening kindergarten leaders and encouraging changed attitudes towards dilemmas. One participant summed this up by saying, “I think I can now identify a leadership dilemma which means approaching the situation in a non-defensive way”.

What creates barriers to the resolution of leadership dilemmas in practice?

Action research purports to understand and then alter the *status quo*. Changing the status quo in relation to the way leaders resolve leadership dilemmas is particularly difficult. The status quo for participants in this study was the defensive approach they adopted when dilemmas were present. The intervention provided them with theory and skill resources (in a brief and limited way) to enable them to adopt a productive approach when confronting a dilemma. Expecting change of this magnitude is extremely optimistic. Data collected post-intervention confirms that some learning has occurred and some self-reported change is claimed by participants. In order to build on these small steps towards changing the status quo, such learning and new action needs to be further internalised. Internalisation of learning is dependent on the learner acquiring, recalling and applying the theory knowledge while performing new actions. It requires praxis. We have been heartened by the participants’ comments about finding the information stimulating and intending to revise the theory as they practice. Internalisation of learning also requires heightened self-awareness of defensiveness (for example, recognition of avoidance, ability to self-monitor values and assumptions).

It also requires self-awareness of success with productive dialogue. One practitioner commented, "I need time to practice this learning. I think I will discover areas I need to gain better understanding of but I will practice the steps". The barriers will inevitably be erected by the learners themselves because it is hard to change the status quo of one's theory in action from a defensive to a productive stance without constant revision of the theory and opportunity for dialogue. This study has made a small beginning in helping the participants to recognise what the barriers might be.

What further leadership development is needed to overcome these barriers?

Internalising of learning from a theory of action approach will only take place as one practises the new skills and encounters difficulties in the process that demand reflection-in-action. Therefore, leaders need to use every chance to experience the success and failure that accompanies every attempt to manage a leadership dilemma to resolution and to see these attempts as the core of on-going learning. But they also need to reinforce and further their learning by attending regular workshops to revise theory and practice skills. They could also benefit from discussion groups involving people familiar with the dilemma management curriculum (Cardno, 2007). Finally, it is necessary to spread this curriculum to the widest group possible. Those who manage head teachers, the head teachers themselves and the teachers in kindergartens need to be able to participate in professional development that allows learning about leadership dilemmas and allows for further practice workshops. This has already begun in this particular kindergarten context because in 2008 and 2009 there are planned professional development events about dilemma resolution open to all kindergarten staff.

What problems could a next cycle of action research address?

Our research has found evidence of leadership dilemmas in kindergarten settings in the Auckland region of New Zealand. It has also shown that if provided with learning resources, leaders in kindergartens can learn to recognise a particular dilemma and respond in ways that hold possibility for resolving the dilemma. But, this research stops short of measuring the extent to which learning is internalised or implemented beyond the point of formal evaluation of an intervention. One cycle of action research is insufficient in terms of drawing conclusions about the capability of these leaders to sustain and apply learning in their own setting in a way that actually resolves a dilemma. What needs to be researched at a deep level is how such learning can change the *status quo* for leaders in their organisational settings and the conditions that the system needs to create to sustain and develop effective educational leaders capable of resolving the leadership dilemmas they invariably encounter.

References

- Argyris, C. (1985), *Strategy, Change and Defensive Routines*, Pitman, Boston, MA.
- Argyris, C. (1990), *Overcoming Organizational Defenses: Facilitating Organisational Learning*, Allyn & Bacon, Boston, MA.
- Argyris, C. (1993), *Knowledge for Action: A Guide to Overcoming Barriers to Organizational Change*, Jossey Bass, San Francisco, CA.
- Argyris, C. (1995), "Action science and organizational learning", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 41 No. 6, pp. 20-6.

- Argyris, C. (2000), *Flawed Advice and the Management Trap*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Argyris, C. and Schön, D. (1974), *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness*, Jossey Bass, San Francisco, CA.
- Argyris, C. and Schön, D. (1996), *Organizational Learning II: Theory, Method and Practice*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA.
- Argyris, C., Putnam, R. and Smith, D.M. (1985), *Action Science*, Jossey Bass, San Francisco, CA.
- Cardno, C. (1999), "Problem-based methodology in leadership development: interventions to improve dilemma management", *New Zealand Journal of Educational Administration*, Vol. 14, pp. 44-51.
- Cardno, C. (2001), "Managing dilemmas in appraising performance: an approach for school leaders", in Middlewood, D. and Cardno, C. (Eds), *Managing Teacher Appraisal and Performance: A Comparative Approach*, RoutledgeFalmer, London, pp. 143-59.
- Cardno, C. (2003), *Action Research: A Developmental Approach*, New Zealand Council for Educational Research, Wellington.
- Cardno, C. (2007), "Leadership learning: the praxis of dilemma management", *International Studies in Educational Administration*, Vol. 35 No. 2, pp. 33-50.
- Cardno, C. and Collett, D. (2004), "Curriculum leadership: secondary schools principals' perspectives on this challenging role in New Zealand", *New Zealand Journal of Educational Leadership*, Vol. 19 No. 2, pp. 15-29.
- Cranston, N., Ehrich, L.C. and Kimber, M. (2006), "Ethical dilemmas: the 'bread and butter' of educational leaders' lives", *Journal of Educational Administration*, Vol. 44 No. 2, pp. 106-21.
- Cuban, L. (2001), *How Can I Fix it? Finding Solutions and Managing Dilemmas: An Educator's Road Map*, Teachers College Press, Columbia University, New York, NY.
- Dempster, N. and Berry, V. (2003), "Blindfold in a minefield: principals' ethical decision-making", *Cambridge Journal of Education*, Vol. 33 No. 3, pp. 457-77.
- Dimmock, C. (1999), "The management of dilemmas in school restructuring", *School Leadership & Management*, Vol. 19 No. 1, pp. 97-113.
- Dimmock, C. and Walker, A. (2005), *Educational Leadership: Culture and Diversity*, Sage, London.
- Ebbeck, M. and Waniganayake, M. (2003), *Early Childhood Professionals: Leading Today and Tomorrow*, MacLennan & Petty, Sydney.
- Friedman, V.J. (2001), "Action science: creating communities of inquiry in communities of practice", in Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (Eds), *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*, Sage, London, pp. 159-70.
- Hoy, W.K. and Miskel, C.G. (2005), *Educational Administration: Theory, Research and Practice*, 7th ed., McGraw-Hill, New York, NY.
- Jorde-Bloom, P. (2003), *Leadership in Action: How Effective Directors Get Things Done*, New Horizons, Lake Forest, IL.
- Leithwood, K., Louis, K.S., Anderson, S. and Wahlstrom, K. (2004), "How leadership influences student learning", Learning from Leadership Project Commissioned by the Wallace Foundation, New York, NY.
- Martin, A.W. (2001), "Large-group processes as action research", in Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (Eds), *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*, Sage, London, pp. 200-8.
- Mulford, B. (2007), "Overview of research on Australian educational leadership 2001-2005", *Australian Council for Educational Leaders Monograph*, No. 40, Surry Hills.

-
- Murphy, D. (2007), *Professional School Leadership: Dealing with Dilemmas*, Dunedin Academic Press, Edinburgh.
- New Zealand Ministry of Education (2002), *Pathways to the Future: A 10-Year Strategic Plan for Early Childhood Education*, Ministry of Education, Wellington.
- New Zealand Ministry of Education (2005), *Professional Standards for Kindergarten Teachers*, Ministry of Education, Wellington.
- Owens, R.G. (2004), *Organizational Behavior in Education: Adaptive Leadership and School Reform*, 8th ed., Pearson, Boston, MA.
- Reynolds, B. and Cardno, C. (2008), "Leadership dilemmas in New Zealand early childhood education and care centres", *New Zealand Journal of Educational Leadership*, Vol. 32 No. 1, pp. 18-29.
- Robinson, V. (1993), *Problem-Based Methodology: Research for the Improvement of Practice*, Pergamon Press, Oxford.
- Robinson, V.M.J. (2006), "Putting education back into educational leadership", *Leading & Managing*, Vol. 12 No. 1, pp. 62-75.
- Robinson, V.M.J. (2007), "School leadership and student outcomes: identifying what works and why", *Australian Council for Educational Leaders Monograph*, No. 41, Surry Hills.
- Robinson, V. and Lai, M.K. (2006), *Practitioner Research for Educators: A Guide to Improving Classrooms and Schools*, Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Rodd, J. (2006), *Leadership in Early Childhood*, 3rd ed., Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest.
- Schein, E.H. (2004), *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 3rd ed., Jossey Bass, San Francisco, CA.
- Schön, D.A. (1983), *The Reflective Practitioner*, Basic Books, New York, NY.
- Scrivens, C. (2000), "Neoliberalism in the kindergarten service: dilemmas, tensions and constraints", *Waikato Journal of Education*, Vol. 6, pp. 143-53.
- Senge, P. (1990), *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, Century Business, London.
- Southworth, G. (2004), *Primary School Leadership in Context: Leading Small, Medium and Large Sized Schools*, RoutledgeFalmer, London.
- Starratt, R. (2003), *Centering Educational Administration: Cultivating Meaning, Community, Responsibility*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ.

Further reading

- Elmore, R. (2006), "Leadership as the practice of improvement", paper presented at the International Perspectives on School Leadership for Systemic Improvement Conference, OECD Activity on Improving School Leadership, June.

About the authors

Carol Cardno is Professor of Educational Management and Head of the School of Education at Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand. Her work in educational administration, management and leadership has been recognised by two fellowships (New Zealand Educational Administration and Leadership Society; and Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management) and the Queen's Service Order for services to this field of education. Her research interests are action research, dilemma management in staff appraisal contexts, and leadership development. She has authored and co-authored several books and journal articles and her current research focuses on deep level examination of the practices of

educational leaders that influence teacher practice in a context of organisational learning. She is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: ccardno@unitec.ac.nz

Bronwyn Reynolds has worked in the early childhood education sector in Australia for more than 25 years in the capacity of a teacher/director, consultant and lecturer. After completing her Doctor of Philosophy in 2004 from the University of Melbourne, Bronwyn moved to New Zealand to take up the position of Programme Director of Early Childhood Teacher Education at Unitec Institute of Technology in Auckland. She is now a senior lecturer in early childhood education at the University of Tasmania. Bronwyn has particular research interests in leadership, early literacy, and curriculum design and implementation.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.