

# Growing Leaders from Infancy Up

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Do ideas tend to play around in your mind, often for long periods and then slowly get some traction? In all probability it happens as ideas filter through the experience and knowledge that comes your way over time. I think that's essentially the way '*Growing Leaders from Infancy Up*' was for me. Much like Guy Claxton's notion (1997) of the relaxed mind finding solutions, this title seemingly just popped into my head and yet I know it's been percolating there for some time. The thoughts in this article are certainly not mine alone as they're built from the deep commitment the teachers I work with have for investigating children's questions, as they engage with children in the process of shaping and re-shaping their theories about this world (Centre of Innovation research, Greerton Early Childhood Centre, 2006-2008). They come too, from the strength of the early childhood community here in Aotearoa New Zealand as over decades, teachers, academics and families have advocated for children's rights. The point of this article is to draw some of those ideas together and focus on what this means for our engagement with infants. Essentially it is about how we might make a difference to learning and teaching for our youngest, most treasured citizens.

Margaret Carr uses a technique that resonates good sense - zooming out and zooming in (2008). Stretching forward to consider what wise leaders look like gives us a vision. It's as Steven Covey says, "Begin with the end in mind" (1990, p. 95). This lets us then track back and think, thoughtfully, engagingly about how we might wrap our babies in an environment that will 'grow leaders'; the kind of leaders that are inspirational, innovative, industrious and interconnected. The 'I's" have it, so to speak! I will frame up the rest of this article around those perspectives, all the while remembering that it is the way these aspects sync together that really generates a quality of leadership that we can all appreciate. Leaders who inspire, who are innovative, who are full of energetic thought and committed work are just the kind of passionate leaders that draw other people into exploring possibilities. They are the kind of leaders who provoke deep involvement and commitment to the work at hand, perhaps even the kind of leaders we would like to be ourselves. You will know them. They stand out and they make a difference! For some of us world leaders come immediately to mind: Whina Cooper, Gandhi, Mother

Teresa, the Deli Lama, perhaps Barack Obama. The leaders you choose will be decided by your own values and some of your most stunning heroes may be your mum or dad or a teacher you work with. The good news is that leaders are not born, they grow! That's good news indeed because as we know from Carol Dweck's research on mindset (2006) it is effort and practice that gets you where you want to be.

I was searching the other day for more Ken Robinson video clips because I so like the way he thrusts us into thinking about what twenty-first century learning could, should, must look like if we are to ensure all learners flourish (Robinson, 2009) and he uses a metaphor that I think is very useful when we consider how we want to nurture leadership in our very youngest children. He likens it to an agricultural model when he says you can't make plants grow. All farmers can do is to provide the nutrients, the conditions and plants grow themselves. So as we start to consider what those 'I's' might mean for the way we build our learning cultures in our own settings, it is very important to think about all of this discussion being wrapped up inside our Te Whāriki cloak (Ministry of Education, 1996). Those Principles of Holistic development, Empowerment, Family and Community and Relationships bind this discussion together, enabling practice to flow from principle. In this way we don't get bogged down by the day to day routines, that if allowed to dominate, can stifle our attempts to model the kind of practice that supports vibrant leaders to grow.

Most essentially, I want to keep my thoughts connected to real learning and it seems to me, there is no better way than to support these ideas with thoughtfully written Learning Stories that provide reflections around real events. These assessments are designed to build children's identities as strong, competent learners. They draw families into a perspective of learning and teaching that resonates with them and nurtures partnerships between teachers and families. So my intention here is to anchor my thoughts and provide real life, contextual examples through Learning Stories. Families and children themselves, where possible, have graciously given permission to use these. The stories are 'Ruby's Learning Story', 'Jackson's Learning Story', 'Hunter's Learning Story' and 'Sam's Learning Story available

through the ELP website. They accompany this article and enable you to dip in and out as you choose.

## Nurturing Inspirational leaders

Children as researchers



Children are primed for curious exploration and a thirst to find out about this world, so new and full of intrigue. One of the sub-questions in Greerton's Centre of Innovation research asked: *How can teachers better recognise these questions and respond to babies in their research endeavours?* Settings that find ways to support babies in this sense are supplying those nutrients that enable babies to explore. Exploration almost by definition generates a climate of choice. As babies freely move they are able to investigate the things that capture their attention. It is this intense investigation that sets the brain's neurons firing, so that neural pathways connect. The more studied and practiced those pathways, the more they are strengthened. Little used pathways wither and die. Again Ken Robinson's agricultural metaphor immediately brings those ideas sharply into focus. So let's think about this for a minute. Picture a setting where babies are expected to fit into the centre's routines. It may be that staffing is tight (low teacher child ratios) and it is easier for one person to check and change nappies for the day. I've heard this referred to as a conveyor belt system. Add scheduled meals and perhaps one or more mat times, punctuated by sleep times and we have successfully sliced and diced the day into what Diti Hill refers to as 'curriculum fragments' (2001). Unfortunately this is a systematised way of working that adults often see as a perfectly acceptable way of organising resources and people. Step aside though for a moment and think about this from the babies' perspectives. Who said that bringing babies together in a large group, working to a routine and timetable, has anything to do with wise ways to grow learners? Where are the responsive, relational connections in that? So let's meet Ruby and see what her explorations tell us. For the whole story you will need to refer to 'Ruby's Learning Story' but I will offer a shorter brief here. Ruby had her plans. She bypassed everything else that teachers, in their best efforts, had designed as she worked hard to build her body's capacity to take her where she wanted

to go. No one else could have second guessed that! All the while she was internalising that effort and practice are satisfying.

A centre that has a setting where free movement is valued, enables children to 'learn to move, then move to learn'. Closed doors and tightly scheduled programmes deny infants opportunities, and these need to be repeated opportunities, to explore the world and achieve the goals they set themselves. All too often we set about choosing for children, where they will be and how long they will be there. If we compress time for a moment and think about how free movement nurtures future leaders, it is all about enabling children to test out their ideas and bring them to fruition. We can see this in Ruby's story. There is a response from her mum to stories and movies about Ruby's endeavours as a 4 year old, raising the stakes on the goals she sets herself (to climb the wall) and then leading by example as she takes this ability, shifts it to another context (climbing around a mountain) and encourages her family to have a go too. Fabulous leadership that started as a tiny baby setting and achieving goals!

## Innovative Leaders what do they look like?

### Strengthening dispositions



*But what children observe most closely, explore most obsessively and imagine most vividly are the people around them. There are no perfect toys; there is no magic formula. Parents and other caregivers teach young children by paying attention and interacting with them naturally and, most of all, by just allowing them to play (Alison Gopnik, 2009, p.4).*

I have loved everything I have ever read from Alison Gopnik. She has such a strong image of thinking babies and a common sense, timeless view of what makes a difference to babies' learning. Forget the expensive, allegedly brain smart toys, especially the plastic fantasitics. It is attachment, connectedness and attentive listening that enables babies to use their logic brains to experiment with life and to be captivated by surprise and possibility as adults support their inquisitive drive. This has implications for when and how we engage with

children and there are no recipes to give us a step by step instructional manual. Teachers must be intentional in their engagements and sensitively, intuitively respond to children's endeavours. They must avoid swamping babies with too much over stimulation, slow down and allow babies to pace themselves.

When I think of the baby researcher, I often recall the day I noticed Jackson being a scientist. Scientists have theories and they test and retest these until they are satisfied. I had been working with a group of children at some water troughs underneath a tree when I just happened to lift my eyes and noticed Jackson, across the garden, investigating the water pressure in the hose (see Jackson's Learning Story). I immediately left where I was, because I could see this was significant. For the next half hour I videoed him, wondering how a little guy, around nine months old could stay in one place, for so long, experimenting. I estimated that overall he remained in that spot for around an hour! As a team, over the years, we have had many conversations, around just what this kind of investigation means, as we've seen this research played out over and over again. It has caused much discussion about the implications for our teaching. We think that what we focus on is what we get. We figured that if we value innovation, deep investigation and building complexity, then we needed to embed in our learning setting every possible opportunity for babies to build working theories and have the chance to test and re-test their understanding. So next time you see someone writing up a roster for the many and varied routines in an early childhood setting, think about that hour that Jackson completely devoted to his experimentation. No one wisked him away for any reason. No one interrupted or interferred with his persistence to keep going and therein lies the connection between teaching and learning. Deep connections and understandings from adults send strong messages to children. Is it a message like: There is time, an intriguing environment and we value what you do.

In terms of innovative leaders, even as a young baby Jackson was willing to let other children into the pleasure he was experiencing. In the process of playing around with all the possibilities presented to him, through placing his finger on the end of the hose and then releasing it, he was modelling possibilities that interested others around him. Fast forwarding to Jackson at four years old, I still saw him inviting other children into the challenges he had set himself. Read his Learning Story and make up your own mind as to whether you think leadership of this kind grows through learning settings that enable children to experiment freely with materials that have no set end in mind.

## growing Industrious leaders

Effort and practice messages



Families and teachers watch babies putting themselves at the edge of learning all the time. This is the cusp of what is comfortable and what is new. It's a place that is unsettling at times but one where a learner can move back into the safety of what they know. For very young infants a wrap around sense of belonging is what enables them to put themselves at the edge of learning and keep wanting more. The times a baby falls down in the quest to learn to walk are almost uncountable and yet there is never any doubt that each child will keep going. Our job as teachers is to nurture all those moments that resilient children look for as they build their working theories. Moment by moment we can support or we can constrain learning to grow more complex.

When I encountered Hunter (Hunter's Learning Story) experimenting with the rope swing I was intrigued. Definitely intrigued enough to watch and video his research for over twenty minutes. Time and again he did interesting things with this rope and laid his body on the line in a thoughtful engagement with possibility. Alison Gopnik (2009, p.3) tells us that adults look for the most likely scenario and based on our experience, we gamble on a few that we think will be effective. Children on the other hand explore possibilities. This twenty-first century world is looking for leaders who continue to do that. So let's build learning cultures where this is the norm and where each child knows that effort and practice are the key, as they experimentally shape and re-shape their understandings and hone their skills. It will mean freeing up your day so children have the time to practice the things that interest them. It will mean ensuring there is a fascinating environment for children to explore without undue interference from adults directing their learning and it will mean offering feedback messages that take them forward to an enjoyment of the intrinsic process of learning and achieving the goals they set themselves rather than external rewards.



Leaders who have a vision that energises others into committed action alongside them, are leaders that understand and value empowerment. So where does this start? At team planning meetings we share Learning Stories. That's how we connect with each other over the magic that is the context of children's learning. Gone are the days when we laboured over what we would focus on for the next week, month, term. We now listen to each others' perspectives and in the context of learning for each child, think about the ways we can grow more complexity. Try it at your next team meeting. Get rid of the housekeeping and tedious jobs to be done. Find other ways to do these things, ways that don't take up precious together time. As you read Sam's Learning Story imagine the response of the teachers around, as the writer, with passion and insight read this to us. I know when I heard Jo read Sam's story, I was immediately captivated, as we all were, by the sensitivity of Jo's presence, alongside Sam and Sam's inordinate ability to connect. When I thought about growing leaders, I thought about the magnitude of the modeling that adults do. In Sam's case, he is surrounded by sensitive adults, in his family and in his early learning centre, adults who think infants are competent and capable and create the space for infants' abilities to unfold, naturally, dispositionally, with many opportunities to engage and be engaged. The story was written in July 2009 and now months later we can see the accumulated progress from such encounters. Sam is full of enthusiastic, fun ideas that draw all around him into exploration. If I was to crystal ball gaze I could only see this social and emotional intelligence growing because Sam has had so many opportunities to test his theories around responsive people.

When we abandon our old notion of planning and think about those moment by moment decisions we make, a thousand times a day, as we engage with the children, families and teachers in our settings, then we are much more likely to realise that those are the moments that make a difference. We are in exactly the right spot to do just that, at the beginning of children's lives, next to the

families that will be their long term advocates. As I reflect more about 'growing leaders from infancy up' it is Te Whāriki (1996) that I keep thinking about. For teachers in Aotearoa, New Zealand, those Principles form the nurturing blanket that is at the heart of the te ao Maori metaphor Tu Whatu Pōkeka (Ministry of Education, 2009). Children shaping their context. We are not expected to be teachers who fill children up with knowledge or expect them to fit into prepackaged programmes. Knowledge is much more fluid than that and in a twenty-first century world knowledge becomes obsolete at a frenetic pace. The dispositions that drive learners to inspire others, use ideas in creative ways, put the effort and practice in to find out more, become more skilled and draw others into their passions, are the kind of dispositions that will ensure all children are successful learners and teachers. It is our job to provide the space, time, models and relational connections that will ensure children grow their leadership abilities, as they learn to love to learn.

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