

Exploring Leadership through Children’s Picturebooks.

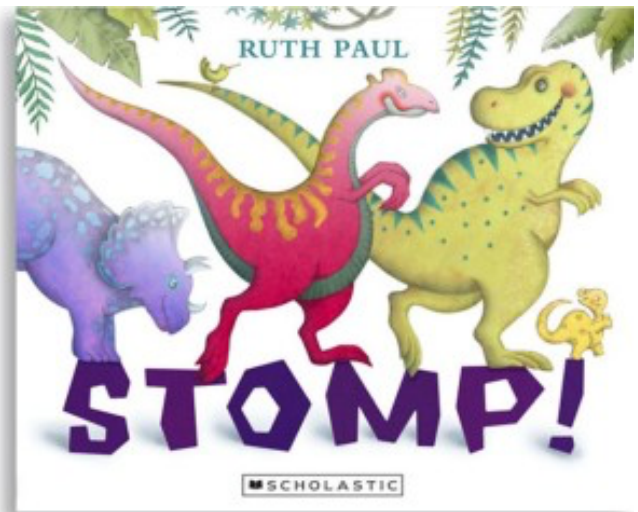
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There is an ongoing debate about whether leadership is an innate trait; something children are born with or if it is something that can be learned. Think about the times you observe children taking charge, being the first to contribute to an experience or emphatically voicing their interests or needs. Are the children showing leadership dispositions? *Te Whāriki’s* vision of the child as “*competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society*” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p.6) celebrates the child’s mana, their agency, their identity and in doing so, acknowledges that the child is indeed a leader or has the potential to be one.

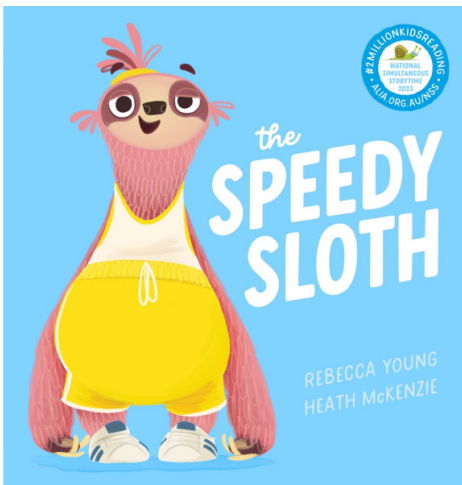
What then is our role as early childhood teachers? How do we nurture children’s leadership qualities and skills? This article explores leadership in picturebooks and how they might be used in early childhood contexts.

Stomp! Written and illustrated by New Zealand author, Ruth Paul, is a playful story about a group of dinosaurs led by fierce T-Rex and then in a twist of tails (*oops, tales*), a baby dinosaur! What happens when they play *Follow the Leader* with two very different types of leaders? Well, what do you think?

Dinosaurs are almost always a theme of interest for very young children. This book, with its colourful illustrations depicts a range of different dinosaurs. The *authorstrator* (yes, that’s a term used for someone who is the author and illustrator of a picturebook) has creatively incorporated characteristics of dinosaurs and pre-historic creatures as well as New Zealand specific flora into the illustrations. Written in simple language, the text invites the reader to participate along by including fun actions such as *in the jungle ROAR... Roly-Poly Fall* and others. Apart from the playful element of this book, it can also be used to have thoughtful conversations about celebrating what children can do.



You could extend this with a fun *Follow the Leader* experience with the children suitable for all age groups. For instance, simple clapping, peek-a-boo, shaking a musical rattle with older infants and toddlers, to inviting children to be leaders and creating their own actions to lead the other children in the room.



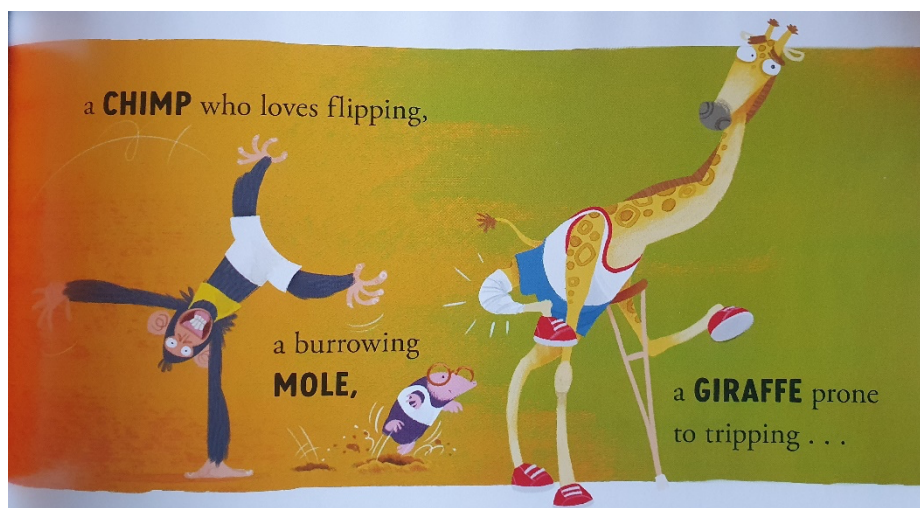
Perseverance is a theme that aligns well with leadership and is interwoven through many of the children’s picturebooks mentioned in this article. *The Speedy Sloth* is an inspirational re-telling of *The Hare and The Tortoise* written by Rebecca Young that explores the idea that what matters isn’t the race that is won but instead, the process of getting there and staying on task, in spite of the hurdles.

In this picturebook, we see that a sloth, generally characterised as being the slowest animal, is able to look beyond her inadequacies to give running a race a go. Heath McKenzie, the illustrator, has been able to portray the animals in the book in affirming ways, giving them unique personalities. Children in the early years are drawn towards books with anthropomorphic characters where animals are given

human-like features. *The Speedy Sloth* is one of those books in which the author cleverly uses figures of speech like oxymorons to convey an important message about breaking away from stereotypes. For example,

*Snail overtook her-
but that guy was a beast!
As fast as a racecar,
or pushbike, at least*

Characteristics synonymous with typical features and personalities of the animals in the book are portrayed both in the text and illustrations giving a humorous stance to the story.



You could use this story to initiate some rich conversations with the children around perseverance, giving things a go, fairness and equity. Social and emotional competence can be nurtured as you jointly explore feelings and emotions such as taking another person’s perspective, being a good friend and encouraging others around them. All these qualities are important to the emotional quotient of leaders, and it is never too early to model it for

children. These themes could be further extended in curriculum planning, where teachers could set-up for experiences that involve cooperation.

Te Whāriki emphasises the importance of nurturing children’s relationships to places, people and things under the Belonging strand (MoE (Ministry of Education), 2017). Closely linked to the *New Zealand Curriculum* area of Social Sciences, this sense of belonging, and gaining a wider perspective of the world can be explored further through picturebooks. Introducing children to leaders in their community is an effective way of nurturing their leadership skills. The following series of picturebook biographies written by one of New Zealand’s most prolific children’s authors, David Hill, are based on people within the local/national community in New Zealand who showed dispositions such as taking an initiative, being courageous and perseverance – all of which are exemplary qualities of a leader. As an educator these books might also be opportunities to extend on children’s dispositions of leadership and a valuable resource to support a centre’s local curriculum.



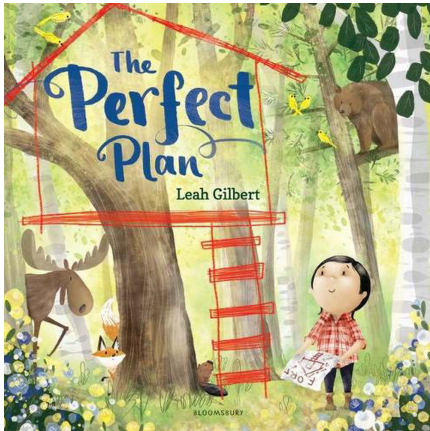
First to the Top: Sir Edmund Hillary's Amazing Everest Adventure

Sky High: Jean Batten's Incredible Flying Adventures

Hero of the Sea: Sir Peter Blake's Mighty Ocean Quests

Dinosaur Hunter: Joan Wiffen's Awesome Fossil Discoveries

Learning about history and significant events that celebrated New Zealand and its tangata whenua could nurture children’s understanding of the world and exploration. These books, beautifully illustrated by Phoebe Morris narrate stories of the lives of ordinary people and the impact they made on the world through their passion and achievements. They can be used effectively to support a range of interests of children, as well as provocations in different set-ups planned by the teacher. For example, *Dinosaur Hunter* would be a great addition to a dinosaur set up. Featuring a woman as the main character could work to nurture inclusiveness and remove stereotypes associated with professions.



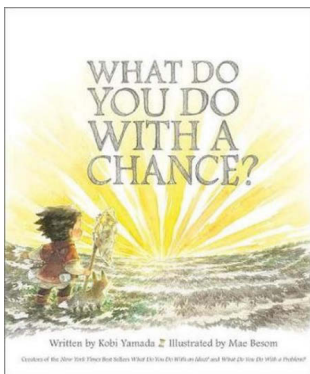
In *The Perfect Plan*, Leah Gilbert narrates the story of a young girl Maya who decides to make her dream of having a fort come true by building it herself. As she goes about researching, planning and implementing her idea, she realises that ever so often, leadership is a shared role and so she enlists others who have skills that she doesn't in order to achieve her goal. This is another beautifully illustrated book, paying close attention to little details that become intertwined within the plot of the story. The inclusion of animals as supporting characters provides that element of interest for very young children, especially as their skills and strengths are celebrated and integral to the plot of the story.

With insights around shared and distributed leadership, this book can be extended by following children's interests. The early childhood teacher can model how planning for their interests could be a multi-dimensional experience, where tasks are distributed and there is a shared responsibility for the plan to come together. You might even want to use this book in your own staff meetings to open discussions around shared leadership.

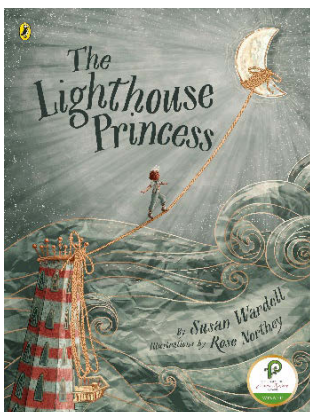
So, what do you do with a chance?

You take it... because it just might be the start of something incredible.

(Yamada, 2013)



Leadership is all about embracing the unknown, taking risks and overcoming fear by developing confidence. Imagine the potential that chances, ideas and problems have when introduced to young children in a safe and secure environment. Kobi Yamada's books *What Do you Do with a Chance?* *What Do You Do with an Idea?* And *What Do You Do with a Problem?* are great provocations to introduce children to the idea of taking risks and seizing opportunities to grow and develop skills. Each of these three books have an unnamed main character who explores the idea of a chance, an idea and a problem respectively as potential rather than a hindrance. The themes although generic, are universally relevant to people of all ages.

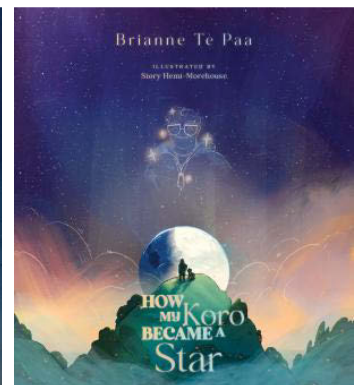
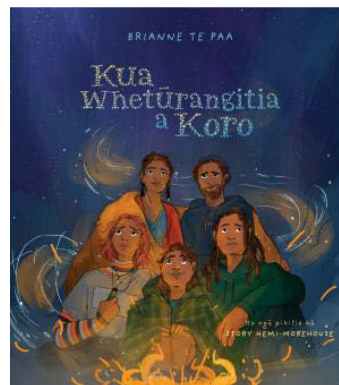


The next book, *The Lighthouse Princess*, will resonate with a lot of young tamariki and is an awesome book to offer them a diverse range of leaders. The main character in this book is a young princess who doesn't need rescuing! She lives by herself in a lighthouse and does different things like fishing and operating the lighthouse. In a turn of events, she rescues a young boy who becomes her friend. Written by Susan Wardell, this New Zealand picturebook can be used to show that leadership lies within a person and sometimes, when the opportunity to be a leader presents itself, you just need to seize it! The book has been illustrated by an award-winning young artist, Rose Northey, who has used a beautiful blend of bright and muted colours. The illustrations portray the strengths of both children but particularly the princess, who

is certainly very empowering. She has also cleverly woven some interesting images within the larger illustrations. Look for the cheeky chocolate fish in the image below!



Māori perspectives on leadership have a strong focus on collective strength and abilities. The rangatira (leader) is ascribed as a person with integrity and who leads with love, empowers people and nurtures their self-identity (Hawkins, 2017). In the book, *How My Koro Became A Star*, Brianne Te Paa explores this concept through the shared knowledge around Matariki customs and rituals a koro (grandfather) passes on to his mokopuna who in turn, shares it with his whānau. I loved how the book captured kaupapa Māori celebrating the oral transmission of cultural knowledge across generations, and whakamana as the boy shares what he has learned with his parents and family. Ako, which is another key idea linked to Maori leadership models, is seen beautifully through this book. What is also unique about this book is that it is illustrated by Story Hemi-Morehouse who is of Māori heritage as she has been able to incorporate it within her illustrations. The book is also available in te reo Māori.





David Riley works tirelessly to nurture a sense of belonging through his books based in the Pacific islands. *Pasifika Heroes* is a collection of non-fiction picturebooks, each showcasing prominent people (including those from Niue, Cook Islands, Tonga, Tokelau and Samoa) who are leaders in their own right. Riley also has a series of books retelling folklore and myths from the different Pacific islands which are also great for introducing young children to Pasifika role-models. You can read more about these books here: [Pasifika Heroes Archives - Reading Warrior](#)

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