

*Original Research Study*

## **Dictators and Directors: Leadership Roles in Children's Collaborative Play**

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### **Abstract**

*Little research has been undertaken into the nature of relationships within children's independent collaborative play. The focus of research has been on selected children working on adult set activities. This article reports on one aspect of a research project into children's spontaneous collaborative play. The research was an interpretivist case study. The research question was "Which factors appear to initiate and maintain collaborative play between young children in early childhood settings?" Children's spontaneous collaborative play was observed for two hours on one morning a week throughout the year, and documented through audio and videotaping, field notes, and digital photographs. A strong factor in initiating and maintaining a play episode was the roles taken within the group by individual children. Two key roles were those of dictator and director. The dictator was more autocratic and less able or likely to resolve inter-group conflict. The director on the other hand had a more democratic approach to conflict and was more ready to compromise to keep the play episode going. Both boys and girls filled these roles, although there were gender differences as to how they carried them out.*

### **Introduction**

Collaborative play assumes a key role within a social-cultural approach to teaching and learning in early childhood education in New Zealand. Little is understood about the factors that encourage young children to play together in a collaborative manner. *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), the early childhood curriculum, is a socioculturally oriented learning document that emphasizes the place of reciprocal relationships in children's learning (Carr & May, 2000). Children's collaborative play is a key element in this process (Tudge, 1992). There is a reasonably large body of literature related to the benefits of collaborative play within general early childhood textbooks, but little specific research-based literature. Most of the research literature is concerned with peer collaboration in specific learning tasks with primary and secondary school students (e.g., Fawcett & Garton, 2005; Murphy & Faulkner, 2006). This article presents findings from a study of four year old children's collaborative play in a kindergarten. It argues that two leadership roles, that of dictator and director were the key elements in gaining leadership in collaborative peer play.

## Literature Review

Young children's leadership is an under-theorised and under-researched topic (Lee, Recchia & Shin, 2005). Much of the research literature involves paired children working on adult set tasks that are aimed to provide data on specific aspects of children's collaborative work. Lee, Recchia and Shin (2005) discuss the importance of relational and contextual elements to explain both styles of leadership and the nature of other children's interactions. In their study of four children aged between 40 to 56 months who had been identified as leaders by their teachers, they identified four leadership styles, the director, the free spirit, the manager, and the power man. In their study a clear gender difference in leadership style was also evident. The boy was much more overtly subversive of the teachers' expected standards of behaviour and this constant challenging of the limits was an important reason for his popularity.

Further publications from that on-going research study have looked at teacher interactions with child leaders (Mullarkey, Recchia, Lee, Shin, & Lee, 2005) and also at the way in which three children, identified as leaders by their teachers, manipulated and influenced not only the play of the other children, but also the teacher's practice (Lee & Recchia, 2008). These influences were both positive and negative in terms of their impact on the classroom community. Ghafouri and Wien (2005) identified four kinds of social literacy that frequently and successfully sustained play in their study. These were leading and following the roles in play, supporting emotional well-being among the participants, collaborating by including others in play by sharing or adding props, and conflict resolution skills, both among participants and between participants and intruders. They found that leadership and power negotiation are important in both developing and sustaining play. There is a greater emphasis on negotiation and initiation in Ghafouri and Wein's analysis of leadership than in that of Lee, Recchia and Shin.

Gender-focussed research offers some insights into the nature of leadership in children's play. Murphy and Faulkner (2006) found that girls' communication contained more collaborative speech than that of boys, while that of the boys contained more controlling speech. Girls were found to demonstrate more elaboration of peer proposals and more responsiveness and mutual coordination than boys. Neppi and Murray (1997) believe that preschool boys and girls differ in how they attempt to influence their partner's behaviour. Girls were found to use indirect demands, polite requests, and persuasion while the boys relied on direct demands, commands, threats, physical force, and a greater use of statements that expressed their personal desires and asserted leadership. Similarly West (1996) found that all male groups used the loudest language, spoke in the simplest sentences and were the most physical in their play. The research of Cook, Fritz, McCornack, and Visperas (1985) indicated that males made greater use of statements that expressed their personal desires and asserted leadership. They found that males made greater use of lecturing or teaching/directing statements.

Gender differences have also been observed with regard to cooperation and collaboration in play episodes. Black and Hazen (1990) found that girls were more likely to join in the activity of playmates and that the play was more likely to involve cooperative, cohesive turn-taking. On the other hand boys were more likely to pursue their own ideas for play, and the play was more likely to be characterized by abrupt shifts of topic, repeated reorganization of play episodes and in general more dispersive social interaction. For boys the degree of liking or friendship with the chosen partner is less relevant in decisions to initiate interaction than the play activity itself (Cook et al, 1985).

Differences in the nature of gendered social interactions have also been noted. Neppi and Murray (1997) found that in social play, the girls played in small groups, most often in pairs. Their play was cooperative, usually organised in non-competitive ways, and constructive in nature. However they found that boys played in larger, more hierarchically organised groups and that status within the group was manipulated in their interactions with their peers. Ostrov and Keating (2004) observed that girls displayed more relational aggression than boys, and that the children tended to receive more relational aggression from female peers. The boys however displayed more physical and verbal aggression than girls and the children received more physical and verbal aggression from male peers. Relational aggression means girls seek power by commanding the role of mother, teacher etc while boys seek power by commanding the role of superhero (Jordan & Cowan, 1995).

Although it is an under-researched area, this literature provided both a conceptual framework (Lee, Recchia & Shin, 2005) and some characteristics of leadership against which to compare the findings in the present study.

## **Methodology**

The overarching purpose of this interpretivist (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007) case study was to investigate the question ‘Which factors appear to inspire and to maintain collaborative play between young children in early childhood education settings?’ The cohesive nature of the group and the confined setting lent itself to a case study approach. Because of the diversity of early childhood education settings, this case study can only be regarded as reflecting children’s play within this context.

## ***Participants***

The research took place in an Auckland early childhood kindergarten. The kindergarten was sessional, with a group of 45 four-year-old children who attended five mornings a week, and a different group of 45 three-year-olds who attended for three afternoons. The research involved the morning group. There were originally 35 children (23 girls, 12 boys) in the participant group. During the year 25 children left the group and 18 children entered it. By November the participant group consisted of 28 children (16 girls, 12 boys). The children were predominantly of New Zealand European ethnicity from middle-class families.

I spent one morning per week from the beginning of March until the end of November 2008 in the kindergarten. Shim, Herwig, and Shelley’s (2001) modification of the nested Parten-Smilansky play scale and Broadhead’s characteristics of cooperative play (Broadhead, 2004) were used to identify collaborative play experiences. When an episode of collaborative play began I recorded it. My role was purely as an observer and I did not participate in any of the episodes observed, nor did I interact with any of the children involved in the play. Only those episodes that arose from the children’s own interests were observed. I did not record any collaborative play episodes occurring around activities the teachers had set up, and I stopped recording any episode whenever a teacher intervened in the play in any way. Sixty-four episodes were observed in the sessional public kindergarten. The episodes were documented using a mix of field notes, videotape and audiotape recordings, and digital photographs.

Teacher participant feedback was obtained by means of regular meetings to discuss the data. If children approached me during a play episode to tell me what was happening I recorded this, but I did not break into the play, or interrupt the play that followed to question them

about the episode I had just recorded. I would make available to the children photos taken of previous play episodes for them to talk about if they wanted to.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

The research had ethical approval from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee. Research with young children poses a number of important ethical issues that need to be addressed. Although the children, aged three and four-years-old were not able to give fully informed consent, which was gained from the parent/care giver, care was taken to explain to the children in terms that they could understand what was being observed and to make clear that they could ask not to be observed at any time. I also looked for non-verbal indications that children were withdrawing their consent.

### ***Analysis***

All field notes, audiotapes and videotapes were transcribed. The analysis was initially done using categories of gender, theme, type, play area (e.g., blocks, home area). Other categories emerged from analysis of the data itself. Examples of these were leadership roles, friendship groupings, communication strategies, and interventions.

The data is reported in regard to the episode it occurred in. The first two digits are the day, the second two the month, and the last two the number of the episode. 08/03.04 represents the fourth episode that was observed on the 8th of March. Pseudonyms are used for all children in this paper.

### ***Findings***

The findings are presented in the form of case studies of groups of children who were consistently involved in collaborative play. Within the kindergarten there was quite a marked difference in the amount of collaborative play undertaken by individual children, and this discussion focuses on those children for whom collaborative play was a common experience as leadership issues were more evident in their play.

There were four clear social groupings (two dyads of boys and two dyads of girls) that consistently were involved in collaborative play when the data collection began at the beginning of March. During the year, as children left the group to go to school and new children came in to replace them both the boys and girls groups coalesced to form larger collaborative play groups, bringing about changes in leadership and control patterns. The data is presented in a gendered manner as that allows differences of leadership styles to be more readily identified.

### ***Boys' Collaborative Play***

In March the two pairs of boys (Barry and Henry, Peter and James) tended to play with each other for the whole of the morning session between the end of mat time and the beginning of clean up time. At times they would drift off to other activities or allow other children into their play, but essentially they were self-contained units. At this stage of the year Henry and Barry would at times move into the play of Peter and James, but the reverse did not occur. The social dynamics within each pair of boys were quite different. Leadership and control of the play was nearly always a contested zone with Barry and Henry. Rejection of the play situation was a common process used when this occurred. Barry was one of the biggest boys in the kindergarten, and he had a minor speech impediment that often made it difficult to understand what he was saying. He would frequently resort to physical action in frustration

when he couldn't get his point across. This would usually lead to the end of the play episode.

Barry and Henry would often use exclusion of other children as a way to emphasise their leadership and control. They were in the sandpit making "poisoned wombat stew" when Terry came over. The following exchange took place.

Terry: Can I help?

Henry: No!!

Terry: Can I?

Henry: I'm in charge.

Barry: No, we're in charge of our one, we're in charge of our one. You're not allowed over.

Later in this play episode this idea of excluding others became extended by Barry and Henry.

Barry: No girls allowed in.

Henry: No girls allowed in the sandpit, only boys, boys, boys, boys, boys, no girls allowed.

Barry: Yes and when the girls come in I will get the axe.

Henry: Yes and we will slice their heads off, yes and then we'll slice the feet off. (04/04.08)

James and Peter spent virtually all their time at kindergarten in the sandpit. They had a number of common themes to their play and did not talk very much as they worked together. They tended to share leadership and their play was marked by very little conflict. When playing with other children outside the sandpit both were content to share leadership and control of the play with others.

The close friendship of James and Peter was threatened in early April by the move of Fred into the morning session of kindergarten. James and Fred had been close friends in the afternoon session and Fred quickly moved into the group. This changed the dynamics quite dramatically as Peter and Fred competed for James' attention. James now became the dominant person in the play, assigning roles and determining the script. Fred had entered the morning session on April 11th, and by the end of May Peter had left the group and the sandpit and was looking for new playmates inside. Peter's mother told me that "Peter only liked one friend at a time" and had said to her "I don't know why I chose James for my friend" (Field Note, 6/6/08). Although James made an effort to revive the friendship, saying to Peter on 20th June "Excuse me Peter, I do want to be your friend" (20/06.32) the friendship and joint involvement in collaborative play was not fully re-established before Peter left for school at the beginning of July. No longer needing to compete with Peter for James' friendship allowed Fred to become more assertive. As time passed Fred became the dominant partner, firstly with James and later with the wider group of boys. The assertion of Fred's leadership in his play with James was not uncontested, and was normally associated with possession of objects associated with the play. In these disputes Fred increasingly came to be the winner. One morning Fred and James were involved in a play episode with Henry and Barry using play dough in the home corner. James and Fred had a tussle over a pair of tongs and the following interaction occurred.

Fred: I want that.

James: No I want it.

Fred: I won't be your friend if I have to.

James: I won't be your friend for ever.

Fred gets possession of the tongs and after using them hands them back to James. Later in the same episode James tries to pick up a wallet that Fred has been playing with. Fred stops him saying "Don't. I've got the wallet."

James responds "OK, then you're not my friend." He accedes possession to Fred saying "you should share" (30/05.30)

After Henry went to school toward the end of June Barry started to become a regular member of James and Fred's play episodes. Barry was not predisposed to accept Fred's leadership and take a subordinate role in the group play. The battle for power commenced the first week after Henry's departure when the boys were in the sand pit. Fred, James, Andrew and Peter had dug one hole looking for treasure and Barry had dug another close by it. A joint leadership of the large group had been established, with Andrew saying to James "You're doing all the right stuff. And me and you and Fred are all in charge." Fred came back with some water and Barry attempted to gain some leadership and control of the play by firstly saying "Look at my hole, he brings water to me too" and when that failed by trying to change the direction of the play saying "We can put the poo in there" and putting liquid sand into James and Fred's hole. Andrew rejected this change of theme responding, "We was making poo last week."

Barry then tried another approach saying, "Join them together" referring to the two holes they have dug. Fred responded to Barry's leadership challenge by introducing a new theme, "We're going to poison all the people in the lake." Barry persevered with his idea; "We're making poo, not poison." Faced with this continuing challenge, James and Fred left the sandpit and starting playing at the water trough leaving Barry to direct Andrew and Peter in the sandpit (04/07.35).

Fred and Barry's leadership struggle was carried on later the same day. Andrew and Simon had gone back to the original hole and made it much deeper. They had struck a pipe and were struggling to get it out. Simon's solution, "I know, just get out of the way guys. I can do it. I just have to dig it out, that's the problem" was immediately rejected by Andrew.

Andrew: I'm going to get Barry.

Simon: Why?

Andrew: Because we are going to get him to help us.

When Barry arrived with James and Fred he immediately took control of the digging process, responding to Andrew's idea "We need your help because it's too hard. Let's dig one at a time" with his own idea, "No, two at a time." James's response to Barry's control of the hole digging was to introduce a water tray into the sandpit play, and this quickly became the focus of attention. Barry tried to bring the attention back to the hole by saying "Help me with my one, I need help." However, when no one responded he went inside (04/07.37).

The competition between Barry and Fred for prime leadership in the wider group of boys continued for a couple of months. It was characterised by heated arguments, conflict over possession of play artefacts and attempts to exclude the other from the play. However, they would always unite to prevent other children attempting to direct the play. The paramount leadership of Fred in the eyes of the other boys was clearly established by the beginning of October. This is clearly illustrated by incidents within a play episode in the sandpit. A group of six boys were digging a waterfall in the sandpit. Luke was about to pour water into the hole but Carlos stopped him saying, "don't pour it in the hole until Fred comes." The boys

moved away from the hole and two girls took possession of it. Some time later Carlos came back and saw the girls digging in the hole and the following conversation took place.

Carlos: Stop that, that's Fred's hole.

Elizabeth: We're making it deeper so the baddies will fall in.

Carlos: That will make Fred angry (he goes back inside to tell Fred what is happening to the hole).

Elizabeth: We're going to keep digging, we're going to.

Alf comes out with Carlos and says: Stop digging the hole, Fred will be really angry.

Carlos: Yeah, we told him.

Alf: He will be very angry and he will push you in the hole. (26/09.56)

The boys play was characterised by competition for leadership among a very small group of dominant boys. Posture, possession, and vocal aggression were the main weapons used to gain control of the play, and physical aggression was rarely resorted to. The majority of the boys in the kindergarten were prepared to follow whoever won the contest. Leadership within the girls collaborative however, showed quite different characteristics.

### *Girls' Collaborative Play*

In March there were two pairs of girls (Wendy and Pat, Sarah and April) who regularly played together. Two other girls May (April's twin sister) and Susan sometimes were part of the play of both groups. Wendy and Pat's play was closely associated with the home corner and family play; nearly all their play episodes began there before extending the scenario into the wider kindergarten setting. Sarah and April's play tended to have a literacy or fantasy theme. In both these dyads the leadership of one girl (Sarah and Wendy) was clearly recognized by the other friend and when conflict arose a negotiated solution was normally attempted and achieved by this girl. The leadership was recognition of their creativity in setting up and developing interesting scenarios for the play. Sarah and Wendy also had better-developed fine motor skills than April and Pat and would often provide help in making things. Sarah and April had made cars out of cardboard boxes, and when April's broke it was Sarah who she looked for/towards to fix it (18/04.13)

Developments within a scenario were normally couched in terms of a suggestion and a positive response. Sarah, April and Flora had been playing a family role-playing game that moved into pretending to be a train and chugging around the kindergarten. As the train was moving along Sarah said, "Let's play hospitals." Flora responded, "Yes, let's play hospitals" and the three girls quickly moved into a scenario with nurses and patients in the hospital (04/04.07).

A typical example of this accepted power and leadership in the girls' relationship can be seen in the following episode involving Sarah, April, and May. Sarah had established hers and April's roles as sisters and proceeded to give May her role.

Sarah to May: You're the baby.

May: I'm the cat.

Sarah: No, you have to be the baby.

Sarah: April, pretend you're in the fairy dress and you can blow out the candles.

April: I'm just excited about the cake.

Sarah: We're going to have party games, first we will play statues.

Sarah: Do you want to come to the play school with us?

On the way to “school” Sarah shows April how to dance, saying “Put your hands on your hips – skip, skip, skip” as she demonstrates the steps.

April: Now we’re big sisters.

Sarah: You sit down because I’m going to be the teacher. (She showed April a book and began to read it to her). (01/08.38)

The dominant leadership role of Wendy is evident in the following block area interaction with Pat. Wendy and Pat moved to block corner and started to build a tower-like construction. Wendy was in control. Wendy said, “It’s done, it’s done, Pat” and stopped Pat from putting more blocks on the tower. Then Wendy said “We need more blocks” and Pat put another block on the tower. The two girls continued to build up the tower. As Pat put each block on top she looked to Wendy for approval. Wendy said, “We need more, we need more of those” pointing to the small blocks they had been standing on end and followed this with, “Start making the side bits” indicating that enclosures should be made for the animals. As the play continued Wendy continued to direct the building and created a story involving dinosaurs, elephants and sharks to provide a purpose for the construction (07/08.43).

At the end of May the two groups of girls slowly began to coalesce. This was only an occasional event at this time, but by September their play together was an established practice. From the beginning there was an acceptance of joint leadership. Rather than competing for leadership, Wendy and Sarah worked harmoniously together to direct the play of the enlarged group. Both offered suggestions for roles and for themes and it was rare for one of them to challenge or refuse to accept the suggestion of the other. Each recognised the other’s particular strength, whether it was Sarah’s ability to make crowns (12/09.51) or Wendy’s expertise in organizing and directing family and cooking scenarios in the sandpit later that morning (12/09.52).

### *Leadership in Mixed Gender Play*

In the first half of the year there was little mixed gender collaborative play. An element of mixed gender collaborative play emerged as a group of children entered the morning session at the beginning of July. The key element was the leadership of one girl, Carol, who became the recognized leader in a number of collaborative episodes that normally involved a number of boys. It was very unusual for another girl to be involved in the play. Her core group included four boys, two of whom (John and Allen) took on quite different persona when invited to participate in Carol’s play. Their normal play scenarios centred on guns and goodies and baddies. When playing under Carol’s direction however, they were happy to take part in quite different domestic types of play. Examples of this type of play were cooking in the sandpit (Field Note 29/8/08), water play (Field Note 19/09/08), dramatic play as office-workers (17/10.59) and preparing and going on a picnic (31/10/. 64). In each of these cases Carol set the scenario and allocated the roles and her leadership was never questioned by any of the boys.

A picnic episode was a good example of Carol’s leadership. She dictated the roles and actions of the boys, “And you two boys have to carry the basket together because it’s very heavy. Yes all of you boys, John, Steve and Allen have to carry the basket because it is heavy. Everybody, plates, everybody gets some plates, let’s see, that should be enough. Now a bowl, we need one each.” At the same time she allowed the boys roles that they felt were gender appropriate within the domestic, family picnic scenario. John was allowed to bring his gun to the picnic, and while Carol changed the baby Steve said “This is the phone for daddy, it’s my work” as he took a phone out of the basket and pretended to talk on it. John

also picked up a phone and starts a conversation, "I need to ... one one, hello fire engine." (31/10/.64)

Carol already had a strong friendship relationship with her main playmate, Steve that had developed socially outside the kindergarten. Neither Carol nor Steve had any strong friendship link with the other three boys prior to moving into the morning session, and Carol's leadership was based both on an ability to communicate with them in a manner that was firm without being overly dictatorial, and by her ability to incorporate roles and actions that allowed the boys to pursue their own interests within the framework of the play scenario.

## Discussion

The leadership styles of Wendy and Sarah were very similar to that of Anna, the girl described as a 'director' by Lee, Recchia and Shin (2005, p.136). The one trait ascribed to Anna that Wendy and Sarah did not exhibit was bossiness. The difference may be due to the fact that Anna was eight months younger than Wendy and Sarah and may not have yet developed their level of negotiation skills. Although Carol's firm leadership in the mixed gender play could be interpreted as 'bossy' she did not act in this way when playing in girls only groups. I have chosen to use 'dictator' to categorise the dominant form of leadership within the boys, rather than Lee, Recchia and Shin's term 'power man'. In this research the dominant boys did not gain their leadership by breaking the rules and humour as had been the case with Lee, Recchia and Shin's 'power man', but by forcing the other boys to accept their leadership through vocal and physical aggression.

In keeping with the literature, there were clear gender differences regarding the nature and style of leadership and control in collaborative play. Within boys, play leadership was dictatorial in style. Leadership was asserted in a number of ways and was always likely to be contested. One method of asserting leadership was to speak in a loud authoritative voice and maintain this until opposition was silenced. This was often accompanied by standing up to assume a dominant posture over the rest of the group (Murphy & Faulkner, 2006). A second technique was to exclude other children from joining the play, or prevent them from taking some action within the play experience. If these methods did not work then the dominant male would resort to some sort of physical action such as taking possession of a disputed object or occupying the disputed space. Very rarely did they take physical action against another boy, and this was normally seen within the group as an unacceptable use of power and ended the collaborative play that had been occurring.

The girls' leadership and control style was much more that of a director. The girls' play was characterised by significantly more talk among themselves (Black & Hazen, 1990) and longer play episodes than that of the boys. Leadership was rarely contested, and the leaders would seek to compromise rather than confront the challenge. They would seek to meet any challenge to their control of the play episode by either incorporating the cause of dispute into the existing scenario, or re-directing the play into a new scenario that the entire group felt happy about. Unlike the boys' play, in those episodes involving two recognized leaders they were able to share the leadership by recognizing the other's strengths.

Carol represented a different leadership style in that she combined aspects of the dictator and the director in her control of the mixed gender play with the boys. She differed from the other girls in her preference to play with collaboratively with boys rather than girls. Carol had a greater confidence to approach boys to play with her, and this gave her an assertiveness that mirrored aggressiveness that characterised the leadership of boy's collaborative play. Previous research (Mawson, 2008) has also identified the leadership role

of girls in mixed-gender play. In that setting dominant males were also comfortable in taking subordinate roles in mixed-gender play initiated and lead by dominant girls and this seems to be an area for further research.

The differences in the type of language used to influence other children's behaviour mirrored those described by Neppi and Murray (1997). The predominant male manner of speaking, even when working harmoniously with friends, was authoritarian and based on demands rather than requests. The girls consistently used a more conciliatory spoken relationship. There was a change however in the boys' common spoken behaviour when working in mixed groups experiences where they more closely modelled the girls' vocal interactions. There was also a noticeable increase in the number of spoken interactions from the boys when they were involved in this mixed-gender play compared with their performance when playing with same gender groups. There would seem to be real value in teachers looking for strategies that would encourage mixed-gender play as a means of developing boys' language skills.

The crucial element underpinning collaborative play seemed be the existence of a leader within the friendship group. Apart from five children who consistently preferred to play and work by themselves, joint play was the normal pattern of play for all 53 children in the study. Friendship was the key factor in determining whom they played with, and the nature of the play. However, most of these joint play episodes were of social and parallel play, and regular collaborative play, such as that described in this article, was confined to a small group within the kindergarten. For the girls the ability of the leader to negotiate and introduce new play ideas was important (Ghafouri & Wein, 2005; Lee, Recchia and Shin, 2005).

The research also throws some light on one element of the 'hidden curriculum' (Eisner, 1994), the curriculum the children enact away from the surveillance and direction of adults in early childhood settings. The three kindergarten teachers had not appreciated the degree of vocal aggression in boys' play until shown transcripts of play interactions. Earlier research in a privately owned centre using the same methodology had revealed that the teachers in that setting also were unaware of a major and consistent theme in children's collaborative play (Mawson, 2008). While teachers may be aware of children's independent collaborative play they are unable to monitor it closely. More 'fly on the wall' research of children's self-directed play such as that reported in this paper would serve to throw more light on children's interests and relationships and offer teachers some insight into this hidden curriculum.

## **Conclusion**

This research has cast some new light on an under-theorised and under-researched area (Lee, Recchia & Shin, 2005). Some clear gender differences in leadership styles have been identified with regard to the independent collaborative play of four-year-old children. Although the boys' leadership clashes were clearly more confrontational than that of the girls, these confrontations were not a major characteristic of the boys' collaborative play. They were episodic and peace reigned until the next challenger for the leadership role appeared. They appeared to play an important socialisation role for the boys in the kindergarten. The girls' leadership was characterised by a much greater degree of compromise and empathy than indicated by previous research. The most significant element would seem to be the way in which boys' play behaviour and language use was different and much closer to that of the girls when playing in mixed gender groups. Further research in

this area, and investigation of teaching strategies that encourage mixed-gender play would be of value.

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