

Article

Learning with Place©: Pedagogical Leadership for Doing ‘Otherwise’

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Abstract

The Learning with Place© framework is a process for change, grounded in positioning local Place first. Generated from a decade-long post-qualitative inquiry—Learning with Place©—focused on pedagogy and practices, the framework creates the conditions to rethink leadership as ‘otherwise’. In this paper, we will offer pedagogical leadership as relational leadership situated in local Place that encompasses collective thinking and relational professional learning to disrupt expected hierarchical contextless leadership. Using speculative fiction, we will share what it means to reimagine pedagogical leadership in new ways, with the intention of offering the possibility of what can eventually happen in the practice of pedagogical leadership. Our speculations make visible how pedagogical leadership should move beyond education settings and be connected with local histories, stories, and the more-than-human. These entanglements provide innovative ways to engage with local and global issues and work towards the common good.

Keywords: Learning with Place©; speculative fiction; positive climate action; post-qualitative inquiry; leadership as otherwise; relational leadership; relational professional learning



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1. Introduction

In these times of planetary crisis, innovative pedagogies are required to respond in ways that are relevant and ethical. This call for innovation includes not only teaching but pedagogical leadership that is connected with local Place, situating Place as the provocation for teaching and learning practices, policy, and structural choices. The Learning with Place© framework (Iorio & Hamm, 2021; Hamm & Iorio, 2025) supports pedagogical leadership and creates the conditions for education to work towards the common good.

The Learning with Place© framework drives change by foregrounding the local environment as an active place to inform practices, policies, and decision-making and generates practices that contribute to the long-term goal of positive climate action. Implementing the framework begins with knowing and understanding local knowledges and stories, histories, and living multispecies and detailing the change an organisation wants to enact. Then, working with First Nations Worldviews and foundational concepts of *coming alongside* (Martin, 2016) and *place-noticing* (Hamm et al., 2021) the process supports an organisation to build a deep relationship with their local Place. This relationship becomes the impetus for pedagogical practices, practices that address change and respond with the local Place. Finally, policies and structures are created that support conceptual commitments and articulated pedagogical practices. Using the Learning with Place© Framework builds strong, ongoing connections with the local Place (see Iorio & Hamm, 2021; Hamm & Iorio, 2025), creating the conditions in an organisation that work towards positive climate futures.

In this paper, we activate the Learning with Place© framework to propose a change in how pedagogical leadership is imagined in education. We begin the framework by recognising the stories, histories, and multispecies of Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Wadawurrung Country in Victoria, Australia. Our long-term collaborations with these local Places are foundational to situating how pedagogical leadership might be rethought as relational and responsive, while also contributing to positive climate action. We offer pedagogical practices that support pedagogical leaders to empower children, teachers, and communities to act as contributing ‘citizens of the now’ (Rinaldi, 2006). Finally, we offer policies and structures that create the conditions that connect educational contexts with their local Places. This process reimagines pedagogical leadership as relational and contextual—it is the impetus for ‘doing’ pedagogical leadership as ‘otherwise’.

Using speculative fiction, we generate examples of what it means to lead ‘otherwise’ to contribute to the common good. Drawing on the Learning with Place© post-qualitative inquiry (see website—www.learningwithplace.org), which includes long-term collaborations with an early childhood setting on Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Country in inner Naarm (Melbourne) and a primary (elementary) school on Wadawurrung Country in regional Victoria, we share a speculative story that illustrates pedagogical leadership as ‘otherwise’. Specifically, the ways in which our reimagining of relational leadership creates practices and structures for early childhood and primary (elementary) settings that situate children, teachers, and staff to work towards positive climate action.

In the next section of this paper, we offer theoretical ideas that support our approach to re-imagining pedagogical leadership that is relational and connected with local Place. Next, we share a story that uses speculation to imagine the implications of pedagogical leadership as ‘otherwise’. Finally, we offer some provocations for readers to activate leadership ‘otherwise’ in their local contexts.

2. Theoretical Invitations to Lead as Otherwise

Traditional leadership often foregrounds the technical compliance structures of educational settings (Brennan & Oloman, 2009). This means that leadership begins with documents, schedules, and checkboxes without thinking first about the local Place. Dominant stories of child development, cost-benefit, and human capital are continually repeated (Moss, 2018) and have informed how leadership is constructed and enacted, perpetuating “hegemonic perspectives of early childhood leadership are repeatedly reinforced or reinscribed” (White et al., 2025/2023, p. 64). Policy becomes the catalyst for sweeping responses that are contextless and superficial, all in the name of quality. These conditions create leaders that are reactive and focused on the technical. Across Australia, early childhood programmes are led and delivered without recognition of the local Place, First Nations stories and histories, or the multispecies (flora, fauna, insects, animals, Land, Waterways, and Sky) the site lives with (Hamm & Boucher, 2018). Yet we know leadership is complex and nuanced (White et al., 2025/2023) and needs an alternative story—a story that creates the space to challenge simplistic implementations of leadership by seeing leadership as otherwise.

Pete Moss (2016), in a paper on educationalist Loris Malaguzzi, offers a way to understand leadership as otherwise. Malaguzzi, known for his foundational contributions to the Reggio Emilia Approach, believed in the “creative power of the group” (p. 170). This commitment and understanding of the group are reflective of the value of democracy and collaboration within the Educational Project in Reggio Emilia. When ‘leadership’ and ‘leader’ are invoked, they immediately construct a group of followers and the act of ‘being led’ and move away from the possibilities of what can happen in the group. In the group, participation is possible, and identifies that “individual knowledge is only partial; and

that in order to create a project, especially an educational project, everyone's point of view is relevant in dialogue with others" (Cagliari et al., 2004, p. 29). The act of being in dialogue is in relation and rethinks leadership as otherwise—moving away from the transactional and technical and to the relational. The word leadership, in this context, is set aside, and pedagogical co-ordination becomes how the conceptual (in this case, democracy and collaboration) are implemented through dialogue and debate with the group structure. These practices can be understood as relational leadership, offering ways to respond to 'big' ideas, such as the climate crisis, through a collaborative style of pedagogical leadership.

Thinking with the idea of pedagogical leadership and co-ordination and the inclusion of debate and dialogue as a group, we expand the understandings of pedagogical leadership to include professional development or, as we re-imagine it, relational professional learning. This bringing together challenges the expectation of the pedagogical leader being the expert and re-situates the staff of an educational setting as a group empowered to generate new knowledge. Professional learning in educational settings in Australia is often referred to as professional development and enacted as 'one-off' sessions to a large audience (Grieshaber & Hamm, 2021). This style of teacher and educator in-service learning leaves little room for collaborative, relational engagement. Drawing inspiration from Carlina Rinaldi (2006), we use the term *relational professional learning* to signify that

Personal and professional development, like education, should not be seen as static or unchangeable qualities, achieved once and for all, but rather as a process, an ongoing path that we follow from birth throughout our lives, now more than ever. Personal and professional development and education are something that we construct ourselves in relation with others, based on values that are chosen shared and constructed together. It means learning and living ourselves in a permanent state of research. (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 137)

From this, we understand that when professional learning is relational, it is an ongoing process over time. Relational professional learning supports pedagogical facilitation that generates authentic engagement with specific people, places, and ideas. This work is slow and requires beginning with conceptual and pedagogical practices rather than starting with the technical. Relational professional learning requires creating the conditions for collective debate and dialogue, spaces where teams can be curious together. Creating these conditions also necessitates a commitment to doing leadership as otherwise, moving beyond the reactive, technical compliance responses towards deeply embedding a conceptual approach to pedagogy.

2.1. Learning with Place©: A Provocation to Leading as Otherwise

We offer the Learning with Place© framework as a way to articulate leading otherwise. This framework was created out of the data from the decade-long post-qualitative inquiry Learning with Place©. This inquiry focuses on responding to climate change, specifically, the lack of relationships between humans and the planet. Through the research, innovative pedagogies are generated that support teachers, children, and communities to build deep relationships with the local Place. When these relationships exist, they inform decision-making and empower humans to create an environment where more-than-human and humans can thrive together. Echoing the commitments of the Educational Project in Reggio Emilia, the Learning with Place© inquiry engages a relational approach to act on our "response-ability" (Haraway, 2016) to the planet. In particular, the project creates the conditions for teachers to debate and dialogue about the practices they generate through consistent visits to their local Place, building knowledge as a group. For example, at the Learning with Place© Lab School in regional Victoria, the teachers have built a strong relationship with Creek, a local waterway on Wadawurrung Country. Their relationship

is foundational to the experiences they create with the children, which have generated pedagogies of walking and listening with Creek. These practices have become more complex as the group—teachers, children, community, and Place—come together to bring their experiences to build new knowledge. This is particularly evident in the on-site school replication of Creek, making visible their complex understandings of the multilayers of Creek—beginning with local First Nations stories and histories and layering biodiversity and environmental knowledges with each person's own connections with the local Place. This type of work calls for leadership that is otherwise, leadership that practices as a group inclusive of local Place.

Using the Learning with Place© framework, we imagine leading otherwise as focusing on a relational, rather than a traditional, transactional approach. Leading otherwise is responsive to the 'conditions of out times' (Vintimilla, 2014) and moves beyond reacting to policy. Leading otherwise begins with recognition of the local Place, enacts foundational concepts of 'coming alongside' (Martin, 2016) and 'place-noticing' (Hamm et al., 2021), generating pedagogical practices that are connected with the context. It considers what technical structures are required to create the conditions to implement concepts and pedagogies that are connected with the local Place and works towards positive climate action.

2.2. Post-Qualitative Research, Speculative Storytelling, and Leading as Otherwise

As researchers, what we came to discover while engaging with our Learning with Place© inquiry is that to generate innovative pedagogies, qualitative research methods narrow the possibilities of how and what knowledge was constructed. This becomes especially evident as we wondered how we could engage in positive climate actions in response to the entangled and complex issue of climate change. We needed to create something new, and a way to do this was through the refusal of standard qualitative research methods (St. Pierre, 2019) and turning towards post-qualitative inquiry. Post-qualitative inquiry intentionally deconstructs the human-centric assumptions of conventional research, such as pre-existing data, or prescribed methods. Post-qualitative inquiry generates spaces for new and experimental modes of inquiry that are relational and entangled, responding to complex ideas like planetary crisis. Speculative storytelling is generated to think with concepts, relational, and entangled. Practicing speculative fiction challenged us to think with environmental humanities (see van Dooren & Rose, 2016; van Dooren et al., 2016; Haraway, 1991, 2008, 2016) and articulate hopeful climate stories.

Speculative fiction is not a new practice, as it was first referred to in the genre of science fiction (Oziewicz, 2017). Author Margaret Atwood (2004) utilises speculative fiction in stories like *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood (1998) to tell what could be otherwise—"speculative fiction can bring us that other kind of news; it can speak of what is past and passing, but especially of what's to come" (p. 514). Furthering current issues and scenarios by creating stories of what could be, postulating, and imagining realisable possibilities challenges existing conditions. It is in what we can imagine that relationality between humans and policy, technology, place, and community where we can find humanity and act, "Understanding the imagination is no longer a pastime or even a duty but a necessity, because increasingly, if we can imagine something, we'll be able to do it" (Atwood, 2004, p. 517).

Donna Haraway (2016, 1991, 2008) offers speculative fiction as SF, "SF is a sign for science fiction, speculative feminism, science fantasy, speculative fabulation, science fact, and also string figures" (2016, p. 10). In particular, Haraway calls on speculative fabulation intertwined with realism in her stories that engage the potential of what could be when multispecies communities and humans flourish together (p. 80). These speculative fictions are the impetus for 'staying with the trouble' and trying not to be reactive and make things all better in one go. Rather, Haraway reminds us that we must commit and continue the

course of being present in the entanglements to find what might be otherwise. Her own speculative fiction, *Camille Stories* (Haraway, 2016), makes visible possible futures through unexpected connections. These stories are provocations to “propose near futures, possible futures and implausible, but real nows” (p. 136).

Drawing on the invitations and provocations of Atwood and Haraway through speculative fiction, we situate speculative fiction as a way to imagine leadership as otherwise. Speculative fiction can build on what we know and understand as leadership in the now. It can challenge us to imagine leadership as relational, situated in groups where knowledge is constructed through debate and dialogue. This knowledge can create conceptual underpinnings informing innovative pedagogies that work towards a positive climate and inform the technical everyday practices of pedagogical coordination. Speculative fiction enables us to access the sometimes inaccessible elements of pedagogical leadership that are not always made visible. Speculative fiction offers a way to reimagine the ways that pedagogical leadership can be in relation with Place, with ethics, and with climate action.

3. Speculative Storytelling

In this section of the paper, we share a speculative story generated from our work with our Learning with Place© Lab School partners. The story makes visible ‘doing leadership otherwise’ and ‘relational professional learning’. Weaving together our long-term research experiences in collaborating with these educational settings with speculative storytelling, we wondered: How do we create the conditions for authentic thinking together and acting with leadership and pedagogy for hopeful climate futures?

Thinking Together for Hopeful Climate Futures

It is a warm afternoon on Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Country. Sun warms the human bodies as the thinking together collective begins to gather for the regular, weekly thinking together (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015) session. The researcher looks out of the window of the purpose-built Collaboration room at the Learning with Place© Lab school and sees the reimagined children’s outdoor play space. Children are playing amongst the lush variety of local Indigenous plants and the play spaces that represent the local Kulin (First Nations) Seasons. A few children stand by the large mural panels on the fence, painted by children in collaboration with a local First Nations artist and educator. The mural panels make visible the school community’s learning alongside the local Kulin Seasons. The panels show learning with the Lands, Waterways, and Skies. The mural is a central element of the school’s ongoing commitment to foregrounding First Nations’ perspectives in everyday teaching and learning. The reimagined playground and mural represent several years of ‘doing leadership otherwise’ and ongoing, relational professional learning.

The Learning with Place© Lab School is well established, with pedagogy and curriculum generated from the Learning with Place© framework, beginning with first acknowledging the First Nations Country where the Lab School is located. Across many years, the teachers and educators have spent time together with researchers generating innovative pedagogies that foreground First Nations’ perspectives and sustainability. This has led to the Lab School making strong connections with their local Place in Wurundjeri Country to inform leadership, philosophy, pedagogy, and policies.

The researcher thinks back to the earlier times when she first began to support the team of educators to reimagine leadership, pedagogy, and curriculum, remembering the tiny, multipurpose room that the team crowded into for the regular thinking together sessions. The room may have been tiny, but the commitment, enthusiasm, and creativity of the teaching team was large! For the first year of the weekly sessions together, the researcher focused on building trust and a rapport with the team; she knew that this would be the

cornerstone of their work together. She spent time working alongside children, teachers, and families and became deeply embedded in the rhythms of each of the Lab School's learning communities.

When she first began to work with the team, she remembers hearing about the time when the thinking together sessions were not embedded as part of the existing structures, and teams did not have the opportunity to think together, to be collectively curious. Working together with the leadership team, who are deeply committed to leading 'otherwise', the researcher has spent time dialoguing with their team to reimagine their centre philosophy, pedagogical choices, and structures. It is necessary for this work to be slow and considered; activating the Learning with Place© framework, we have spent several years working through the reimagining process.

This process is complex and requires a leadership style that looks beyond administration and compliance structures and towards complex, relational, and dialogical leadership. Leading 'otherwise' is not an easy task; it requires creating spaces of resistance (Moss, 2018), where alternative narratives of early childhood can be made visible and work towards the common good. The leadership team has worked hard to reimagine decades of old structures that limited the capacity for teachers to gather and share pedagogy and curriculum ideas. They have created new structures, for example, making regular time for teachers to gather and share. It is now commonplace for teachers to engage in weekly thinking together sessions and 'walk throughs'—a time to visit another classroom to view documentation, engage in debate and dialogue, and to learn from each other.

Today, we begin our thinking together session with one of the teachers sharing an ordinary moment, an example of practice that she has gathered from her classroom. She shares a story of children noticing the changes to the plants in our Kulin food garden. The children notice that Murnong (yam daisy) is beginning to grow flowers. The teacher shares that the children are curious about Murnong's lifecycle. As a group, we think together about how this ordinary moment might be activated to generate a pedagogical inquiry. During the discussion, we draw on the Aboriginal knowledge stories from the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework, written by Dr. Sue Atkinson, that share conceptual understandings.

The Yam daisy represents the survival of a strong Aboriginal identity. The yam daisy was central to the diet of Aboriginal Victorian. It was almost wiped out by colonisation but has survived. (Department of Education and Training, Victoria, 2016, p. 38)

We wonder together how we might activate the children's curiosities about Murnong to generate teaching and learning with Wurundjeri Country. This inquiry style of generating curriculum is commonplace in the centre. Children's learning is made visible through relational, living documentation that is situated with Wurundjeri Country. The teachers collaborate with collective curiosity, supported by ongoing, relational professional learning rather than a series of 'one-off' transactional sessions. Doing leadership 'otherwise' has created the conditions for this rich, authentic teaching and learning to occur, working towards the common good and positive climate action.

4. Leadership and Positive Climate Action

Speculative stories, generated through the Learning with Place© inquiry, create opportunities to reimagine leadership in ways that work towards positive climate action. In the speculative story, we begin by naming the First Nations Country where the stories take place. This practice acknowledges and 'comes alongside' (Martin, 2016) the stories, histories, and customs of that particular Place. This ensures that the stories are situated and have a specific context. Drawing on the Aboriginal knowledge stories from the Department of Education and Training, Victoria (2016) to situate pedagogical leadership creates the

conceptual understanding of local places and responds to the imperative in the framework to foreground First Nations' perspectives in everyday teaching and learning. This practice creates alternative narratives (Moss, 2016) of leadership pedagogy and curriculum; teachers and educators focus on thinking *with* concepts to generate teaching and learning rather than framing learning as a narrow set of goals or outcomes to achieve. Learning with your local Place means that pedagogical intentions (Land et al., 2020) that generate teaching and learning are provoked by making strong connections to our local Places. These connections are deep and ongoing rather than short term or superficial. Thinking with concepts generates innovative pedagogies that are required to address important issues, such as the climate crisis. When conceptual thinking and pedagogical practices are activated, they can inform structures and policies that support pedagogical leadership as 'otherwise'. Relational professional learning or thinking together sessions become commonplace as pedagogical leadership as otherwise includes teachers, educators, and local Place. These structures dispel the need for followers or experts (Moss, 2016) to generate teaching, learning, professional relational learning, and pedagogical leadership that responds to the conditions of our times (Vintimilla, 2014).

5. An Invitation: Activating Leadership as 'Otherwise'

Philosopher Maxine Greene invites people to engage in doing through her words: "I don't want to save the world, I only want to start a conversation" (Sousanis & Suzuki, 2015, p. 6). Greene situates these words as the impetus for more actions that are reflective of being 'wide-awake' in the world. Iorio and Parnell (2025) are provoked by these words and writings of Greene, as they align with Greene, imagining a more just world through hope, engaging the public about what is possible when conversation begins, and opening up spaces for discussion, debate, and dialogue.

For us, the conversation begins when we rethink leadership through the Learning with Place© Framework. The framework situates us to begin with Place—the stories, histories, and more-than-humans that inhabit the local environment. Beginning with Place is how we construct leadership that works towards change within a setting and is connected with the community. This is relational leadership; it is leadership that is 'otherwise'.

Specifically, through the shared speculative story, we imagine the conditions for thinking together as a group. This group entangles leadership, pedagogies, and hope with the intention of working towards positive climate futures. Leadership should be more than what happens in a setting. Leadership should grapple with complex issues like climate crisis, migration, and poverty. Speculative fiction gives us the power to imagine what could be, because Atwood (2004) tells of how this gives us the possibility of what we can eventually do. We situate our speculative story as an invitation to imagine how, in your contexts, leadership can be imagined as 'otherwise'.

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