

Leadership in the role of the Associate Teacher: Enacting teacher leadership and mentoring.

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Investigating and reflecting on leadership skills is a crucial area to focus on for Associate Teachers. Not only are leadership skills important for Associate Teachers' own professional development, but their knowledge, attitudes and leadership abilities also assist student teachers in developing their own leadership skills. The development of leadership has significant implications for the education sector as a whole, as it fosters both professional growth in this area and enhances the theoretical foundations of leadership. Associate Teacher Support Lecturers Maddie Hendrie and Amy Thynne, share insights and experience regarding the role of mentorship in fostering teacher leadership.

Introduction

As Associate Teacher Support Lecturers, the authors have noticed the dedication Associate Teachers have to furthering their skills in relation to their ability to support their students' learning. One of the areas of leadership that could benefit with more intentional attention is the development of Associate Teachers' own understanding of their leadership practice in relation to supporting student teachers' leadership. In the role of Associate Teacher, experienced teachers have opportunities to strengthen their leadership practice and the leadership practice of the student teachers they lead. One way to achieve a deeper understanding of leadership is to promote and model the leadership style of shared leadership that is increasingly used in early childhood education (Educational Council, 2018b). By intentionally sharing leadership with their student teacher, the Associate Teacher strengthens the leadership within the team, while drawing upon the team's experience and expertise to help them in their role. This article will therefore include an examination of leadership capabilities, Associate Teachers' own leadership, the role of mentoring in Associate Teachers' leadership, communication, collaborative leadership, and the impact of mentoring on student teachers' leadership.

Leadership capabilities

Documents such as *The Leadership Strategy* (Education Council, 2018a), *Educational Leadership Capability Framework* (Education Council, 2018b) and *Our Code, Our Standards* (Education Council, 2017) indicate that leadership is a requirement of all teachers, not just those in positional leadership roles and that leadership capability can be developed over time. Before leaders develop skills, they need to grow their own leader identity, and examine their own values and interpersonal skills (Egan, 2021). This can prove difficult though, as it is possible to feel hesitant about being a teacher and a leader at the same time (Cooper, 2019).

Leadership in early childhood education has traditionally had a low profile partly due to there being no clear definition and understanding of leadership (Thornton, 2019). Therefore, there can be a tension between shared leadership and the idea of having one positional leader, as leadership is usually associated with positional leaders, and thus non-positional teachers' leadership is not always recognised (Egan, 2021). Teachers can be reluctant to see themselves as leaders, as they may be hesitant to engage with power and authority (Woolston & Dayman, 2022). Priority can be given to management tasks, and there can be very little time available to focus on leadership development (Egan, 2019). This prioritising makes it difficult for less experienced teachers to take on leadership roles or conceptualise their practice as leadership, especially as there can be a lack of formal leadership education (Egan, 2021). A mix of experience and formal training can be useful, though often leadership development is left up to chance (Cooper, 2019).

Identifying moments of leadership in their daily work practices could prove helpful in supporting leadership development and provide a useful foundation. Building awareness is imperative. Egan (2021) comments that the “one possibility to support teachers in their identification with leadership is the greater visibility of the concept of teacher leadership, encouraging teachers to consider leadership as linked to their teaching practices and identities” (p. 29). Part of cultivating this visibility could involve Associate Teachers reflecting on how their utilisation of leadership in their role not only enhances their own leadership skills but also enables student teachers to recognise and develop their own leadership potential (Woolston & Dayman, 2022).

Associate Teachers' own leadership

Teacher leadership can be seen within the context of shared leadership in which teachers have key roles and are able to influence changes needed in the centre environment (Woolston & Dayman, 2022). As Associate Teacher Support Lecturers, we have witnessed how Associate Teachers' work can be seen as a form of teacher leadership because of the influential nature of mentoring (Thornton, 2015). This influence has been observed in practice both in the ATPD (Associate Teacher Professional Development) and through centre visits, working alongside Associate Teachers to support student teachers' practice. As mentors to their students, Associate Teachers need to have “relevant funds of knowledge, relationship skills and intrapersonal dispositions” (Brouwer et al., 2017, p. 28). High levels of self-awareness and self-efficacy are necessary, with a capacity to grow teachers' professional learning and therefore their teacher leadership (Brouwer et al., 2017). Moral qualities are also beneficial with connections to ethical and authentic leaderships practices. Other key aspects are acceptance, empowerment, vision, humility (as it shows openness to being a leader and learner at the same time), empathy and interacting with respect and dignity (Kenny et al., 2022; Sheilds & Hattingh, 2022). These aspects can be linked to the perspectives of cultural views of leadership such as a te ao Māori (Māori world view) lens. Connections can be made to rangatiratanga (chieftainship). In early childhood education (ECE), this can be defined as “showing humility, leadership by example, generosity, altruism, diplomacy, and knowledge of benefit to the learning community” (Hawkins, 2017, p. 21). These ideas are in line with the values that are regarded as essential in other indigenous views of leadership, especially Pasifika (Cooper et al., 2021a) as outlined in *Tapasā* (Ministry of Education, 2018) and *Our Code, Our Standards* (Education Council, 2017).

Associate Teachers can develop and advance their leadership skills as part of their role. The leadership role of Associate Teachers can be recognised as extending their professional learning development (Woolston & Dayman, 2022), which has been clearly evident to us as facilitators in ATPD discussions and conversations with Associate Teachers while on centre visits. It is important to acknowledge the Associate Teacher role and how this supports leadership capabilities through mentoring and leading not only the student teacher, but the team in general (Woolston & Dayman, 2022). Working with students contributes to the building of leadership capability across ECE settings (Woolston & Dayman, 2022). Leading as an Associate Teacher can also open up the possibility of other professional roles, especially as they more widely share their expertise (Sewell et al., 2017), and are inexplicitly practising their leadership skills.

Associate Teachers can be supported in their role by learning about different aspects of mentoring, such as dispositions, skills and understandings, hence professional development is welcomed by Associate Teachers to fully understand their role and what is needed to enact it. However, due to the need for formal professional learning for Associate Teachers, good collaboration between centres and Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers is important (Sewell et al., 2017). Some ITE providers support Associate Teachers with networking opportunities and professional development. The ATPD gives Associate Teachers the opportunity to have discussions with us, as experienced lecturers, and with fellow Associate Teachers that strengthens this networking and development aspect. Having some shared responsibility for educating student teachers between centres and ITE providers could therefore be beneficial (Sewell et al., 2017).

An Associate Teacher's support system can also be provided by their team and having a culture of shared mentoring, along with creating induction processes for new Associate Teachers in the centre (Sewell et al., 2017). Leadership can be seen as a collective practice and as being enacted by people in shared practice. This collective leadership could impact on student teachers by developing their understandings about how working with others is possible and how mentoring can possibly be put into practice (Cooper, 2019; Sewell et al., 2017).

In the ATPDs that we offer in New Zealand Tertiary College, we provide a comprehensive range of professional development workshops that include key aspects such as, mentoring, clear communication, reflection and wellbeing which are intended to foster leadership capabilities. The practical strategies we and the Associate Teachers share and discuss enable Associate Teachers to model practices to the wider team, therefore not only mentoring student teachers but the teaching team as well. ATPD examines how leadership capabilities can be woven holistically through being in a leadership position and through shared leadership within a team, as we share examples from our experience of how students' practices can be supported intentionally and team support can be utilised.

The role of mentoring in Associate Teachers' leadership

A distinction can be drawn between supervision, which is task orientated and goal driven, and mentoring, which has a greater focus on caring for the individual and their needs and development (Woolston & Dayman, 2022). Both are needed for the student teacher to be able to meet outcomes and develop professionally in knowledge and practice. This gives room to develop shared understandings of the responsibilities and expectations needed in the

teacher role (Woolston & Dayman, 2022). Relationships are a key part of a successful practicum and Associate Teachers and students need to work together closely in a collaborative, reciprocal partnership with a learning-orientated approach in all aspects of daily teaching practice. While the Associate Teachers' role is about guidance, reciprocity and ako are also empowering here. Associate Teachers' mentoring and leadership, as does any teaching, involves influencing others, and high trust relationships and communication as vital aspects of leadership (Thornton, 2019; Woolston & Dayman, 2022). These key aspects are discussed across the range of the ATPD sessions, in particular in the *Effective Mentoring* session. This ATPD is valuable for new Associate Teachers in gaining new learning and for slightly more experienced Associate Teachers to have their practice affirmed and to share their wisdom.

Sharing one's identity, beliefs and values is part of good leadership, as authenticity is embedded in building relationships. Authenticity involves being honest, forward looking, inspiring and showing competence (Chaffey, 2017). It is good to set foundations for a positive relationship and a mentor showing they are interested in the mentee (Lye, 2021). The environment should also provide trust, security and consistency to students allowing them to thrive as a teacher in that they know what the expectations are and develop a plan accordingly (Lye, 2021). We encourage Associate Teachers to include the aforementioned aspects in their work with student teachers; emphasising the need to facilitate early initial meetings to establish relationships, set out clear expectations and communicate.

Communication

Effective communication is fundamental to both leadership and mentoring with important aspects being listening, asking and answering questions, professional discussions, conversations and feedback (Rodd, 2013). It is beneficial to create opportunities for interactions and two-way conversations and asking open questions to help guide the student teachers to discover their own answers (Lye, 2021). The ATPD for this area concentrates on the importance of having clear communication and expectations, which is important for effective leadership (Rodd, 2013).

There are many lenses of leadership and one that we believe fits effectively within the realm of communications here, is the Pasifika concept of Vā. Vā refers to the relational space between people and all living things; the space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates but space that relates (Fa'avae, 2019). This is a great area to explore within Associate Teacher leadership as it looks at nurturing the sometimes unconscious space with respect, timing and ways to approach others, alike to the notion of the hidden curriculum which also highlights the less conscious space. Vā also requires negotiation and understanding, and another aspect of Vā is the "acknowledgement of past and present, seen and unseen, and before and after" (Cooper et al., 2021b, p. 20). In other words, the focus is on the funds of knowledge and potentials that the Associate Teacher and student teacher bring to the partnership, how they can both evolve from this partnership in their own directions, and how they support each other to do this. Hence, both Associate Teachers and students are leaders in their own right. We notice that recognising and respecting what each person brings is beneficial and empowering to both the Associate and student teacher. Working with others brings challenges at times with communication and interpretation, but it also brings opportunities to learn (Jenson 2018).

Collaborative leadership

The sociocultural view of teacher leadership and mentoring acknowledges the importance of collaborative leadership and the relationships within a professional learning community. The team's expertise is valued (Sewell et al., 2017; Denee & Thornton, 2019). From experience gained through the ATPD and Field Practice visits, we have found having the support from the team, both the teaching team and the management team, is vital for Associate Teachers to be able to successfully facilitate their role with the best outcomes for student teachers. With the management team's support, time and space can be made available for professional discussions. With the teaching team, encouraging student teachers to converse with and utilise their knowledge within the wider team is beneficial and we have observed it also fosters and evokes each teacher's own teacher leadership. This teamwork approach is similar to the truism 'it takes a village to raise a child' in that 'it takes a team to support an ITE teacher's growth'. We have also noticed it allows time and space for Associate Teachers to intentionally focus on this area of leadership. Associate Teacher leadership qualities will continually develop and be modelled by student teachers when they have the opportunities and the agency to mentor that is supported by the rest of the team. This empowering experience lifts morale, supporting the Associate Teacher to really connect with the student teacher and their learning tasks (Sutcliffe, 2021). Knowledge sharing is a powerful tool (Sutcliffe, 2021) and is a great leadership practice to model. Associate Teachers' knowledge sharing can support student teachers to understand the reasons behind their actions and look at different avenues and ideas supporting them to make knowledge their own (Lye, 2021).

Knowledge sharing across a centre not only supports daily practice but can provide insights, reduce training times, help people feel part of the centre, bring about continuous improvements and innovation, and show what best practice fits the centre context (Smith, 2022). This collaborative professional learning leads to building capability (Sutcliffe, 2021). These ideas can be connected back to the rangatira (chief) concept that all people were responsible for the welfare of the whole iwi (tribe), and it took everyone's contributions to achieve collective success (Hawkins, 2017).

The impact of modelling positive leadership dispositions

When Associate Teachers are modelling shared, collective and collaborative leadership, showing actions of taking responsibility, agency, change, shared vision and professional attitudes, it fosters dispositions of empowerment, self-efficacy and motivation of students (Sutcliffe, 2021). Having these positive attitudes and a proactive initiative in teacher leadership will naturally model proactive behaviours, however, being an effective teacher leader does not automatically mean that it makes for an effective Associate Teacher (Sewell et al., 2017). Mentoring and coaching skills can sometimes be needed to develop and refine further the teacher leadership aspects. Terrell (2018, cited in Kenney et al., 2022) identified ECE leadership characteristics that could be recognised in mentoring as "emotional intelligence, self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills" (p. 16). Self-awareness is fostered by behaviours of being open and willing to take on feedback. Seeking feedback is a great way to build one's own practice and model the cycle of continual learning and development. Student teachers can build on this self-awareness with self-reflection on their practice and enact by utilising the knowledge from the whole team and

not just the Associate Teacher. The importance of Associate Teachers modelling best practice and students being able to draw on the team's knowledge is emphasised in ATPD.

Empathy supports the notion of understanding others as who they are and where they come from, and allows for respectfully learning different ways of being and doing regardless of agreeing with it or not (Kenney et al., 2022). Cooper et al. (2021) remind us that leadership is individually and contextually understood and can be governed by the dominant ideology and norms. Thus, Associate Teachers and leaders need to be aware of individuals' cultural capital, as this can influence both enactment and interpretation of leadership. The authors note that learning from each other and fostering the partnership relationship supports this respectful understanding of each other. Communication and relationships (whanaungatanga) enable this understanding. The enactments of sharing knowledge and empowering student teachers to be part of the team and take on relevant areas of responsibility can motivate collaboration and valued participation of student teachers. Associate Teachers modelling these positive dispositions and characteristics support student teachers in developing the dispositions and attitudes needed in teacher leadership.

Conclusion

We conclude that Associate Teacher leadership has a significant influence on student teachers' leadership development. Associate Teachers' awareness of their own identity in leadership can support their intentionality in fostering recognition of the leadership characteristics and dispositions in student teachers, and subsequently encourages student teachers to participate in general teacher leadership practices. As teaching and leadership are not separate from one another, this is a good motivation to see leadership as an important area to invest time and resources in; both in general leadership and Associate Teacher leadership, as enacting and building the attitudes and dispositions for leadership can be consciously nurtured through the mentoring partnership.

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