Practicum: A space for leadership and mentoring

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ABSTRACT

Associate teachers (ATs) play a crucial role in supporting beginning teachers but there is little research that identifies the practicum as an opportunity for advancing ATs' leadership capability. While research identifies mentoring as central to the way ATs support beginning teachers entering the profession, there is little explicit discussion of the leadership skills ATs engage in and model to student teachers during a practicum experience. Nor is there explicit acknowledgement of the AT role as a pathway to leadership for early childhood teachers. In this article we draw from a case study located in a provincial New Zealand city and a review of literature to demonstrate that practicum is largely overlooked as a space for early childhood teachers to develop and advance their leadership skills. We argue that mentoring and supervision of student teachers during practicum provides a rich opportunity for ATs to increase their own professional knowledge and expertise as leaders within early childhood.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of leadership in early childhood education (ECE) has intensified within the research literature and in practice, yet questions remain about the ways in which ECE teachers conceptualise themselves as leaders (Rodd, 2013; Thornton et al., 2009). One challenge, according to Rodd (2013) is "the disinclination [of ECE teachers] to see themselves as leaders" despite the "high levels of autonomy and independence enacted in practice and policy" (p. 11). Klevering and McNae (2018) suggest that ECE teachers are reluctant to engage in roles and responsibilities associated with power and authority. Reluctance to take on leadership roles is multifaceted, but traditional discourses of ECE leadership continue to influence the way leadership is theorised in ECE (Thornton et al., 2009). This article is positioned within current research that highlights effective leadership as a critical element of quality educational provision, programmes and outcomes (Halpern et al., 2021; Stamopoulos, 2012). We argue that through mentoring student teachers, practicum offers ATs opportunities to identify with, and to further develop and model the role, skills and benefits of leadership.

Leadership within ECE can be conceptualised in a range of ways. We use the Education Council New Zealand – Matatū Aotearoa (Education Council, 2018a) definition of leadership as "influence with purpose" and educational leadership as the "practice of supporting others to make a positive difference to children's and young people's learning" (p. 8) to frame our discussion. Building on this definition we view leadership as both formal and informal and from this stance seek to shed further light on Lovett's (2018) claim that teacher leadership is a neglected area in ECE, and that leadership capacity resides in teachers.

Drawing on the scholarship on mentoring during practicum we assert that the role of the AT during practicum within ECE can be conceptualised as a form of teacher leadership. We share Rodd's (2013) view that mentoring is a "key leadership strategy because it focuses on helping practitioners [student teachers] to realise their personal and professional potential" (p. 175). Using data gathered through semi-structured interviews with teachers, we highlight AT insights that reflect important relational skills when mentoring student teachers. The article concludes by arguing that mentoring by ATs during practicum is a missed opportunity to identify leadership and ECE teachers as leaders.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In reviewing the literature, we were interested in the way leadership is understood and enacted in ECE. The review highlights four key themes, which are discussed in the sections below. The first section addresses how leadership in ECE is conceptualised. The second section is about the definitions of leadership that frame our article. The third section looks at mentoring as a strategy that supports ATs in practicum and builds leadership capacity in ECE. The fourth section covers the ways in which a mentor's passion for teaching serves as a force of influence on student teachers.

Conceptualisations of leadership in ECE

The nature and context of ECE makes it difficult to conceptualise and generalise definitions of leadership from other contexts (Thornton, 2009). There is however agreement about the importance of leadership in relation to quality educational outcomes (Halpern et al, 2021; Klevering & McNae, 2018). Research suggests a reluctance of ECE teachers to identify as leaders as "many early childhood teachers fear or avoid discussions about leadership due to misconceptions about what leadership entails. These misconceptions challenge teachers' ability to recognise, understand and engage in leadership as part of their everyday practice" (Cooper, 2014, p. 84). Misconceptions about leadership are evident also in Diamond's (2014) research, which shows that leadership continues to be associated with power and control. Conceptualising leadership in this way influences the views ECE teachers hold, often aligning leadership with management (Diamond, 2014; Klevering & McNae, 2018). Thus, despite agreement on the importance of ECE leadership, confusion remains about leadership in practice (Klevering & McNae, 2018).

Another feature that complicates the ways in which ECE teachers might conceptualise leadership is that teachers and leaders often work collaboratively in ECE (Halpern et al., 2021; Thornton et al., 2009; Thornton & Cherrington, 2014). Leadership approaches in collaborative settings tend to be shared or

distributed among teachers (Halpern et al., 2021). Lovett (2018) along with Pankake and Abrego (2017) promote a type of leadership that involves teachers working together and leading according to context or task, which is termed teacher leadership. Teacher leadership is defined by York-Barr and Duke (2004) as "the process by which teachers, individually or collectively influence their colleagues … to improve teaching and learning practice with the aim of increased student learning and achievement" (pp. 287–288). This concept of leadership identifies teachers as occupying key positions and spaces to influence change (Lovett, 2018; Pankake & Abrego, 2017). Teacher leadership is a useful concept for this article, as it resonates with the role of influence ATs have during practicum.

Framing leadership as a relationship of influence
Leadership is often framed as one of influence over the thinking and actions of others (Rost, 1997; Stamopoulos, 2012; Thornton & Cherrington, 2014). In this article, we use the term "influence with purpose" from the Teaching Council (Education Council, 2018a, p. 8) *Leadership Framework* to speak to the role of the AT in practicum. Developed for the Aotearoa New Zealand education sector including ECE, primary and secondary settings, the *Leadership Framework*'s vision is to support all teachers with opportunities to develop their own leadership capability. The *Capability Framework* (Education Council, 2018b) sets out the expectations for nine leadership capabilities. In keeping with the strategy, the framework fosters leaders who influence others to "act, think or feel in ways that advance the values, visions … and flourishing of learners" (p. 3). High trust relationships are considered essential to leadership; they serve as an anchor for quality education and are woven throughout the nine capabilities (Education Council, 2018b). Relationships are therefore a key element of a successful practicum.

The importance of the practicum relationship is noted by a number of researchers who identify the relationship between the AT and student teacher as critical to the success of the practicum experience (Wilson, 2018). Quinones et al. (2019) support this stance, drawing on research of international student teachers that illustrates the importance of good relationships that are fostered when mentor teachers [ATs] are perceived as friendly and approachable. Communication plays a central role in the way influence is enacted through the relationship between the AT and student teacher (La Paro et al., 2017). Trevethan and Sandretto (2017) emphasise the importance of engaging in dialogue and communicating with others to enhance reciprocity in mentoring relationships and in the construction of both student teacher and AT professional identities.

Other qualities ATs should hold to be successful mentors include being enthusiastic, flexible, supportive, approachable, passionate, sensitive, encouraging, open-minded, non-judgemental, having a sense of humour, ethical, committed, collaborative, authentic and understanding. Other scholars have focused on the role and what the AT does, for example, being organised, a listener, role model, facilitator, assessor, friend, trainer or teacher, protector, colleague, evaluator, communicator, mentor, enabling participation, giving freedom and being a partner (Woolston, 2017, pp. 8-9).

Supervision of practicum and mentoring
Practicums are critical in initial teacher education programmes (Beck & Kosnik, 2000; Grudnoff, 2011; Sim, 2011). Central to this is the quality of the ATs and the role they play in influencing the practice of student teachers in ECE settings. One of the key qualities and components of being successful in the AT role is mentoring (McDonald & Flint, 2011; Sewell et al., 2017). Heikkinen et al. (2012) state that "mentoring can be seen as "professional guidance relationship in which an experienced, intellectually and socially valued mentor acts as adviser for a less experienced employee and helps this 'mentee' develop his/her work" (p. 13).

Despite frequent debate, the term 'mentoring', as opposed to 'supervision', is now widely used in the education field (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010). Most accept that unlike supervision, which is largely task-orientated and goal-driven, mentoring tends to be more focused on caring for an individual's needs and facilitating their development (Sigley et al., 2017; Sim, 2011). However, some acknowledge that such a concept is difficult to define and can be interpreted in a number of ways (Devos, 2010; Jones & Brown, 2011). This change in terminology signifies a shift away from a hierarchical approach to working with student teachers to an approach based on "shared understandings regarding roles, responsibilities and expectations among teacher educators, schools and student teachers" (Grudnoff, 2011, p. 231). In the practicum experience mentoring sits alongside the responsibility the AT has for supervision and assessment. It is generally agreed that ATs take on a dual role of mentor and assessor; that is, a mentoring role with assessment responsibilities (Aspden, 2015; Grudnoff, 2011). However, the reality is more complex than this. Aspden (2015) reports that "mentoring and guiding students was viewed by ATs and teacher educators as the primary task of their role" (p. 106). Yet Grudnoff (2011) paradoxically states that "In New Zealand, for example, student teachers are required by the Teachers Council to be constantly supervised by their AT, which means that a student teacher can never be exposed to all of the challenges and 'unknowns' that they will encounter when they first start teaching" (p. 230). Tillema et al. (2011) argue that the tension between mentoring and assessment needs to simultaneously support the student teacher to meet learning objectives and develop professionally. The same authors also note that this can be addressed through having combined and mutual perspectives on the process and criteria of the practicum experience and that "assessment for learning (AfL) needs to a be prioritised goal in mentoring relationships" (Tillema, 2011, p. 140). Sigley et al. (2017) further calls for assessment models in initial teacher education programmes that reflect the dual purposes of assessment: professional learning and professional accountability.

Tillema et al. (2011) argue that we can have confidence in a "mentor-guided, judgement-orientated approach to assessment that will provide students with further opportunities for improvement in performance and reflection" (p. 140). This is supported more recently by Sigley et al. (2017) who suggest that the mentoring role within the practicum experience can bring together the role of mentor and assessor through attention to the formative and summative aspects of assessment.

The role of the mentor is not new to teacher education. Researchers have looked at what makes a good mentor and highlighted some of the characteristics that they possess, such as: openness to sharing knowledge, willingness to give

constructive feedback, adaptability in difficult situations, and ability to create a positive and supportive environment (Graves, 2010; Russell & Russell, 2011). This provides a sense of how mentors work with student and beginning teachers that is still relevant today. The overarching view from the literature is that if both mentors and student teachers can accept a learning orientated approach to/understanding of mentoring and assessment in the practicum experience then it will be a valuable, worthwhile practicum for both the AT and student teacher.

However, it has been acknowledged that working with student teachers can at times be challenging, and there may be negative emotions associated with the AT role. This is largely due to the AT and student teacher being incompatible, thus making it difficult to build a positive relationship (Sim, 2011). In some cases, ATs also have to face stressful situations that require context-specific leadership practices, which might impact their desire to take on such a role again. This is evidenced by Aspden and McLachlan (2017), in Stover (2019), who state:

> Thus, local knowledge – ways of knowing, ways of working with STs, ways of assessing the efficacy of a student – will likely shape the day-to-day interactions between the AT with a ST. These can be fraught for a number of reasons, including clashes in personality as well as disagreement about philosophical approaches to ECE. (p. 15)

Modelling passion for the teaching profession

Research around the way a teacher's passion for the profession and for children has grown and show the positive outcomes of passion and how it can impact the people and practices within a professional context (Serin, 2017). In particular Gilal et al. (2019) state, "Our study has established the importance of a teacher's work passion as a strategic tool in improving students' work passion. Our findings show that the teacher's work passion is an important means of increasing passion among students" (p. 897).

Passionate teachers are seen to be able to create effective learning environments and are aware of the effect of passion on student success and how it can lead to an increase in learning potential of students. Passion can be situated as essential for quality and effective learning as there is a clear "relationship between passionate teaching and quality education" (Serin, 2017, p. 61).

Passion is seen as a disposition that teachers foster; it is relationship based and considered essential for teaching (Zhang, 2019). Passionate teachers are aware of challenges in relationships and contextual environments but have a "clear sense of identity and believe that they can make a difference to the learning and achievement of all their pupils" (Day, 2004, p. 2). Passionate teachers are seen to engage in a range of teaching styles and strive to teach in ways that will enhance each student's interests, beliefs, creativity and vision. Passion ignites "students in the kind of education that will provide them with opportunities to live a rich learning life – and a part of this is equipping them for the changing workplace" (Day, 2004, p. 75).

While the work on teachers' passion has predominantly focused on the influence of passionate teachers on children's engagement and learning we suggest that this can equally be applied to student teachers who are finding their space within the profession under the guidance of an AT. Mentors who are passionate about their teaching and ECE are positive role models and provide

affirmative and constructive influences on student teachers. Passion for the profession and for children is manifest in the aforementioned qualities of mentoring including relationships, communication and mutual trust. Constructing strong relational foundations in the practicum experience is a reciprocal responsibility underpinned by trust developed between the AT and student teacher (Wilson, 2018). Wilson (2018) suggests that due to the time bound nature of the practicum, ATs and student teachers must get to know each other quickly to build strong foundations. Once established this relationship offers a space for growth and learning with reciprocal benefits for the AT and student teacher (Trevethan & Sandretto, 2017; Wilson, 2018). Mentoring relationships are a key element of a successful practicum as they involve personal interactions based on trust and collegiality and are educative in focus (Education Council, 2015; Sewell et al., 2017).

The mutual and educative benefits of the mentoring relationship between the student teacher and AT is also described as critical in the research literature on leadership in ECE. In this study we sought to re-examine data from a previous study to examine whether the mentoring relationship between the AT and student teacher can be understood as one of teacher leadership.

The research literature clearly states that practicum is a key component of initial teacher education which is supported by the role of the AT. Scholars speak to the importance of building reciprocal relationships between the AT and the student teacher, which is accomplished through the skills of mentoring, communication, support and professional knowledge.

METHODOLOGY

This article is supported by a secondary analysis of data from a study of nine ECE ATs that was originally conducted through semi-structured individual interviews as part of a master's dissertation. A constructivist theoretical framework supported the generation of data through a qualitative inquiry approach. While mentoring and leadership was not the focus of the original research, this article reports our secondary analysis of the data to reveal ways in which the participants spoke to their supervision and mentoring as evidence of teacher leadership.

The secondary analysis of the original verbatim transcripts was guided by the following research question: 'In what ways do selected early childhood ATs practise teacher leadership through their work as ATs?'

The original study was carried out in a provincial New Zealand city. Nine ATs who had a range of experience as ATs were interviewed (Table 1).

Participant name* and ethnicity**	Highest Qualification	Number of years of teaching	Number of years as an AT
Athena, New Zealander	Bachelor of Education (Teaching)	27 years	Over 3 years
Demeter, European	Bachelor of ECE (Teaching)	27 years	Over 3 years

Artemis NZ European	Diploma of Teaching ECE	27 years	Over 3 years
Rhea, European	Diploma of Teaching ECE	18 years	Over 3 years
Hera, Indian	Bachelor of Education	20 years	Over 3 years
Leto, New Zealander	Graduate Diploma in Teaching (ECE)	5 years	2-3 years
Hestia, NZ European	Bachelor of Teaching and Learning	27 years	Over 3 years
Astraea, Pākehā with a Māori background	Bachelor of Education	17 years	Over 3 years
Hebe, New Zealander	Graduate Diploma in Teaching (ECE)	3 years	First time AT

Table 1. *Demographic information about participants*

*Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity
** Participant ethnicities were self-reported.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Secondary analysis of the semi-structured interview data revealed that the four most important components of the AT role were mentoring, communication, relationships and passion. While these main categories have been named for the purposes of this article, they are interdependent in practice, and each intersects with the other throughout the AT and student teacher interactions. The data is presented as a qualitative investigation and individual quotes are used to afford a more comprehensive description of the ATs perspectives. Interviewees are identified by a pseudonym.

Mentoring
The professional skills and qualities of mentoring were identified by four participants as being the main reason they were ATs. However, the following qualities identified under mentoring were also evident and are listed in their order of frequency. Supporting; reflection – provoke thinking; helping; guiding; observation; giving time – availability; encouraging; patience; responsibility and honesty.

Analysis of the verbatim transcripts reveals that being an AT provided an opportunity for the participating ECE teachers to develop and practice mentoring skills and they found mentoring an enjoyable experience when working with student teachers. Take, for example, Hestia, who said "*I really like the whole mentoring side of working alongside teachers*". This was confirmed by Astraea who thought *"[It was] another step in my journey of being a mentor"* and Rhea who viewed mentoring as a way of igniting professional conversations as she stated: "*Obviously mentor them, mentor the students, promote professional discussion*".

Two other ATs perceived taking on an AT role as the next step to additional responsibility in their career pathway, in that it empowered them to adopt a leadership role. This leadership role was also clearly recognised as a way of extending their personal professional learning development. Specifically, Leto stated clearly *"[It was a way] to practise my leadership roles … and provide personal professional development"*.   Artemis was invited into the role by others who said "*this is the next step, you've got lots to say …. I wanted to pass on knowledge and help people come up and get their qualification*".

We suggest that further emphasis is required on the importance of the AT role and how mentoring and leading the way with student teachers is a crucial step in building the leadership capability of individual ATs and supporting ECE professional learning and advancement. The role that ATs play improves the teaching profession and can set "the commitment and effectiveness of the future generations of teachers" (Sanders, 2005, p. 133) and in this way mentoring of student teachers can be viewed as contributing to leadership capacity building across ECE systems.

Relationships

ECE teachers who engage in the AT role can be viewed as emerging leaders who are willing to influence student teachers as future ECE teachers (and leaders), who in turn will make a positive difference to learners and the learning community (Education Council, 2018a). ATs often recognise the practicum experience as one where they can build reciprocal relationships with student teachers that promote personal professional development (Beck & Kosnik, 2000; Russell & Russell, 2011). The professional skills and attributes of relationship building were identified by some of the research participants as being the main reason they served as ATs, including Hera: "*Relationships are the start of things. I think that is really important for the role [AT]*".

Hestia also considered establishing relationships early as important to the practicum experience:

> I think that very first contact with [the student] is really important for [the student] to develop a sense of belonging and I'll introduce [the student] to all the staff and children if [the student is] here during the session. So, I'll really make [the student] feel welcome from the word go, from the moment [the student] walks in … that's a big part of it, that initial relationship building.

The *Capability Framework* supports the construction of leadership that is relational. Leaders are encouraged to develop high trust relationships where respect, empathy, humility and openness in discussions are fostered (Education Council, 2018b). High trust relationships are at the heart of the success of practicum, therefore when ECE teachers engage in practicum mentoring relationships they are engaging in leadership, which is modelled to future ECE teachers and leaders (Wilson, 2018).

Forming relationships between the AT and the student teacher were a prominent feature reported by our participants. Hestia explains the benefit of the practicum relation with students, "*I really enjoy that whole relationship building and the conversations that come in, the passion, yeah and just the whole teacher*

journey".   Athena also suggested "*that you build a good rapport [with student teachers]" to support their experience and learning in the practicum*".

Opportunities for the ATs themselves to extend their own professional knowledge was identified by a number of our participants including Athena who explained learning from the practicum relationship as being "*both ways. Different people do have different philosophies and different practices and you get a chance to see them*".   Hera identified the student teacher/AT relationship as reciprocal and always shifting — "*at times you are walking beside them, at times you are sort of walking behind them and at times you are walking in front of them. It depends on their knowledge, experience, confidence*". Demeter also spoke to the mutual benefits as "*a feeling of reciprocal learning*" when describing her role as an AT, which resonates with previous research. Stamopoulos (2012) suggests that leaders in ECE are professionals who share in a reciprocal process to pursue change for a better future. Practicum provides student teachers an opportunity to work alongside ECE mentors to enhance their knowledge and practice and ATs also benefit from the relationship they build with students (Trevethan & Sandretto, 2017; Wilson, 2018).

The Teaching Council (Education Council, 2018a) stresses that leaders are future-focused, which requires an ability "to establish, cultivate and sustain positive relationships with others …" (p. 19). This is exemplified by Hestia who recognised the benefits of supporting student teachers to grow through the practicum mentoring relationship stating,

> I really enjoy the whole comradeship, the whole mentoring working alongside teachers seeing them grow and especially cause I'm an experienced teacher, seeing these young teachers come along and where they're at and I just reflect back to when I was young and the same.

As a relationship of influence, Rost (1997) claims that the multidirectional nature of influence, allows leadership to move in any direction. Understood in this way, the mutual educative benefits of the relationship between the AT and student teacher presents opportunities for leadership skills to be developed and strengthened for both the AT and student teacher.

Hera captures the mutual benefits describing the practicum relationship as working "*both ways – a benefit for them as well as us*" and noting "*the mutual benefit for the centre and the student. It takes a little bit of time, but it outweighs …what you receive … from the students*".

The educative benefits of Hestia and Hera's perspective of the AT role highlight Pinnegar and Hamilton's (2009) belief that "We do not construct practice alone and most often coming to know practice involves deepening our understanding of and relationship with others" (p. 14).

Constructing practice together is captured in Astraea's description of being an AT:

> You learn so much from a student. I can learn from them, I'm learning from our student all the time because of the conversations she come in for, you know it is just having those deeper conversations that are bought in.

In the following section, using data from the secondary analysis as the platform, we discuss the importance of effective communication in teacher leadership focused on developing positive mentoring relationships and influencing professional practice during practicum.

Communication

Communication can be considered as a "mechanism" that supports the relationship and professional learning between the AT and student teacher (La Paro et al., 2018, p. 369). Key elements of effective communication found in literature and in our own study include answering and asking questions, scaffolding, advice, providing feedback, and allowing opportunities for reasoning and problem solving that can support the outcomes of the practicum experience for both the student teacher and the ECE setting (La Paro et al., 2018; McDonald & Flint, 2011; Quinones et al., 2019). Rodd's (2013) work on leadership in ECE, also highlights the benefits of effective and reciprocal communication for leaders. The following qualities were also identified across all nine participants and are listed in their order of frequency: Listening; answering/asking questions; professional discussions; conversations and feedback.

Hebe made connections between communication and building relationships as an AT stating, "*I think it is someone who has very good communication skills and relationship skills to build that relationship, so a student teacher is willing to listen and willing to work in a team*".

The skills and benefits of effective communication to support professional growth for student teachers are described by Rhea who suggests:

> You probably need to be someone that can mentor people, who can question people, who can explain questions that they might have, can answer questions they might have, role model, you know can role model best practice. Someone who can communicate properly, obviously, someone with good communication skills.

Another suggestion which is reflected in both leadership and mentoring literature is coaching that supports student teachers to engage in reasoning and problem solving (Lambert, 2003; Lovett, 2018). Scaffolding knowledge and skills with opportunities to explore and engage in a variety of tasks is another suggestion that is also noted as a beneficial outcome of the mentoring relationship between an AT and student teacher and of leadership (Lambert, 2003; Lovett, 2018).

Lovett (2018) considers shared dialogue concerning teaching practice as an opportunity for meaning making and to improve pedagogy. According to Lovett (2018) dialogue requires relational trust to support communication between colleagues which she argues "open communication and safety and support to take risks" (p. 74). Leto highlights opportunities to scaffold student teachers' professional learning by sharing her own experiences, "*So, I just talked to them and they and I think my experiences as being a recent student and beginning teacher really helped me to see both sides I guess*".

Rhea shows a belief in the capability of student teachers and their right to lead learning and acknowledges the reciprocal benefits of having "*professional discussions*" which provide opportunities for ATs and centre staff to *"[we] learn*

from them, learn from what they are studying, new things that they can bring to the centre".

Rhea highlights the role ATs play as reciprocal leaders and learners through the mentoring relationship they build with student teachers (Lovett, 2018). While relationships are at the heart of mentoring and leadership during practicum, communication is a vital relational thread that weaves together the AT and student teacher support. We conclude our findings discussion with the final theme, passion. We argue that passion supports effective learning opportunities and outcomes and is therefore critical to teacher leadership and influence with purpose.

Mentors modelling passion for education and learning

The literature on teachers' passion is typically framed in terms of the students within their classroom and the impact this has on their learning (Day, 2004; Serin, 2017; Zhang, 2019). However, we would like to argue that a mentor who is an AT that exhibits or models passion for her work with children, families and her colleagues in an ECE setting can influence the student teacher in much the same way. This is a missed opportunity for research as teacher passion does not feature often in literature on mentoring and yet ATs can have a strong influence on a student teacher's desire to be a teacher as was evident in our study.

In the relevant data from the small study, Demeter stated "*The role of a good associate teacher is someone who is passionate about teaching".* This was supported by Hera who stated: *"Passionate is a biggie, that a teacher needs to be passionate*". This was clearly an overarching disposition required to be an AT as Demeter further added later in the interview "*you have to have a passion for teaching*".

The influence of teacher passion is supported by Serin (2017) who states, "Passionate teachers can make a difference in students' lives and achievements. Passionate teachers accomplish this with who they are, what they know (field knowledge) and how they teach (beliefs, attitudes, personal and professional values)" (p. 62).

Lastly, the interviews also gave rise to a number of AT attributes that were mentioned by just one AT but when taken collectively speak to the ways in which ATs position themselves alongside of students. For example, ATs spoke of 'learning from the student', being 'inspired' and having the opportunity for their own professional development. These among other data reinforce the ways in which serving as a AT provides ongoing learning and opportunities for future leadership.

In general, having a student teacher was seen by ATs as a way to "give something back to the profession" (Sanders, 2005, p. 130) and show that they had skills and knowledge to offer student teachers. ATs also wanted to support student teachers and inspire them to have the passion the ATs themselves had for teaching and young children (Sanders, 2005, as cited in Woolston, 2017). As we have maintained throughout our discussion, the mentoring role ATs engage in is one of influence, therefore it is a role of leadership. As Peace claims "As teachers, our passion helps us to be more concerned with the lives we are trying to change … Passion is necessary to accomplish the extraordinary, and the extraordinary is what teachers do every day" (Martin & Mulvihill, 2017, p. 178).

CONCLUSION

The perspective of the AT as a leader is missing from literature particularly in relation to the role they play and the mentoring process involving student teachers in the practicum experience. From the secondary analysis underpinning this article, the ways that the participating ATs influence with purpose is evidence of teacher leadership, despite limited research linking the AT role to leadership capability. We argue that the AT role is a missed opportunity to be viewed as a way to enrich practice, extend the craft of teaching and professionalism and develop mentoring and leadership skills among ECE teachers.

Lambert (2003) asserts that leadership is reciprocal and purposeful and that "everyone has the right, responsibility and capability to be a leader" (p. 425). We agree with this stance and assert that ATs model leadership, influencing student teachers with opportunities for reciprocal and purposeful professional dialogue that contributes to professional growth. The AT role needs to be further explored as a site for developing leadership in ECE. Are practising teachers missing this critical opportunity as a way to open and advance their knowledge around mentoring and leadership skills?

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