A SYSTEM APPROACH TO PEDAGOGICAL LEADERSHIP – REFLECTIONS ON LEADER PRACTICE

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This article discusses the pedagogical leadership role of centre-based Directors and the value of working with a mentor in regular professional dialogue. Mentors support Directors to critically consider the day to day functioning of the centre, the professional culture of the service and the progression of strategic initiatives.

At the beginning of 2019, we embarked on a yearlong project, working with our mentor to strengthen our effectiveness in guiding pedagogy to improve educators' practice and curriculum throughout our services. Our ultimate goal was to enhance learning and wellbeing outcomes for all children. We prepared for our meetings by reading articles about pedagogical leadership and leadership more generally, reflected on our own practice and that of educators between meetings, maintained a journal of our task and time management and engaged in collaborative and consultative work with room team leaders to strengthen pedagogy.

During monthly meetings we discussed a broad range of topics with our mentor, including our observation that administrative and management demands were competing with time to focus on pedagogy. Eventually, we settled down to focus on key pedagogical leadership concepts that were then discussed in the form of examples of practice that were challenging us.

Through these discussions with the mentor, we identified key functions necessary for pedagogical leadership, which needed to be incorporated into our daily leadership practice. We also developed two documents:

a pedagogical leadership diagram and a Director's task list. Later we added a program cycle and guide for educators, highlighting key concepts and processes, which was developed in collaboration with educators. As part of our discussions, we also took some time to appreciate that our increased presence in the children's rooms, providing direct and timely feedback and guidance on practice to educators, could reduce the recurring problems that took up so much of our time.

Director presence

Accountability and responsibility has been a focus for the organisation in supporting Directors, team leaders and educators to have high expectations of what learning opportunities are being provided for children and how this is being documented. A significant amount of time was spent reflecting on our role as Directors and the importance of our presence when embedding new knowledge or change. We have discovered that the more time we spend in rooms providing feedback in the moment about the quality of practice and learning provided, the more educator practice has progressed.

Keeping a task and time management journal has enabled us to reflect on how we divide our time between the competing demands of a complex role and to understand the tasks we were spending time on that are better distributed/delegated to others. Through this process we have increased our presence and participation in professional dialogue with educators. We have been engaging in collaborative discussions with educators in room teams to consider children's learning and the implications for program planning, and provided pedagogical feedback about educators' documentation of children's learning. Educators have remarked that the feedback about their documentation has been valuable and we have noticed a strengthening of educator ability to write robust pieces that offer new understandings of how children learn over time.

Professional conversations about pedagogy

Our skills in providing specific feedback when talking with educators about pedagogy now focus on supporting educators to understand what theoretical frame is informing their curriculum decision making and what educators expect to achieve for children's learning. By making links to research, theories and curriculum, we foreground theory in our practice and engage in shared professional dialogue to aid critical reflection for ongoing
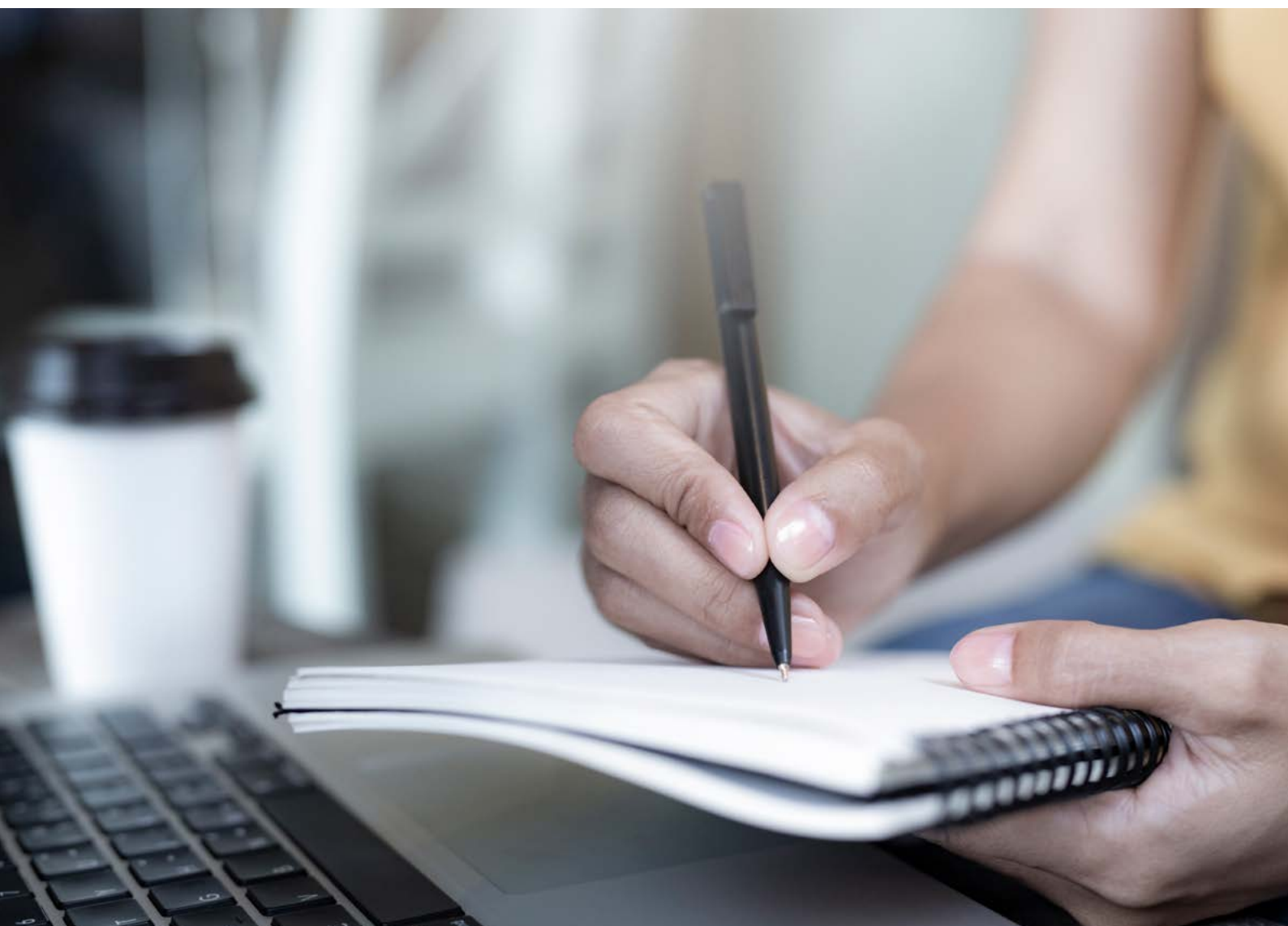
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improvement. To ensure that what we are talking about together is reflected in educator practice and planning, pedagogical meetings are held where educators demonstrate how their thinking translates to the artefacts of their program. This might include showing the links between different parts of the program cycle and translating how their knowledge of a child's identity as a learner affects the materials on offer in the learning environments. This experience then provides a model for our team leaders to coach, guide and challenge educators in their team for ongoing improvement to pedagogy and curriculum. The ripple effect of all educators working with each other in this way supports the development of a professional learning community (Colmer 2017).

Professional learning and embedding agreed change

A key challenge identified early on in our project was our ability to embed and sustain change through ongoing follow up with educators over time. We reflected that often a lack of follow up was due to a lack of documentation. In response to this, we developed systematic approaches to keeping notes of the key challenges and threads of learning for each team. This is providing us with opportunities to analyse growth and learning over time and act with strategic intentionality in our leadership.

To solidify and ensure the longevity of our learning throughout this project, we have designed a pedagogical leadership system for the Director role, capturing the details of a systemic approach to enacting pedagogical leadership of self, others, room teams and the organisation.

How we plan for professional development and learning offers another layer to consider with respect to our pedagogical leadership. Colmer et al. (2015) highlighted the difference between staff accessing one-off external professional development activities and ongoing internal professional learning activities and the need for ongoing follow up and action in order to introduce and embed new initiatives. Through this lens, we analysed our current practice in making decisions about the professional learning and development we were offering our staff. We reflected on how our systems can support a fine balance between the professional learning desires of individual educators and the need to focus our efforts on the strategic direction of the organisation and addressing any knowledge gaps which impacted on our program. Systems are being created to ensure individual learning or group learning from all forms of professional development and learning have follow on actions or responsibilities to support new knowledge to filter back into the program. As Directors we have thought about different threads of learning that we want to achieve and how these build on one another over time through careful planning. An annual professional learning plan is developed, taking into account the various internal and external opportunities and forums we have available to us. This plan has flexibility built into it to respond to changing and emerging priorities throughout the year.

The results of our mentoring project

The mentoring project has highlighted the importance of a systematic approach to pedagogical leadership and that Director presence is essential when supporting and driving pedagogy. The development of learning communities has lifted the professional identity, satisfaction and morale amongst educators. Collaboration amongst teams has allowed for multiple perspectives, that have supported deeper thinking and planning for children. Creating a systematic approach has allowed Directors to streamline professional learning and development to successfully embed learning over a year without trying to capture too many ideas at once. We can see the outcomes for children in improvements to learning and wellbeing, with more children engaged earlier and for longer.

REFERENCE LIST

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