

2023 Premier’s NESA Quality Teaching Scholarship

Mentoring practices and professional development to support expert teacher development

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# Introduction

The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers is a public statement of what constitutes teacher quality. Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher’s (HALT’s) have engaged in a rigorous, standards-based process to evidence their impact on student learning outcomes. They have measured the impact of their work against these standards and are considered expert. Hattie (2003) discussed that “students who are taught by expert teachers exhibit an understanding of the concepts targeted in instruction that is more integrated, more coherent, and at a higher level of abstraction than the understanding achieved by other students.” It is a responsibility for school leaders to support teachers in moving from novice to expert (proficient to the higher levels) so that all students are given the opportunity to excel in the same way as those measured by Hattie.

These processes benefit schools and the wider system in ensuring that teachers across all curriculum areas and schools have access to expert teachers. Evaluation of mentoring models for expert teachers, around teaching practice rather than leadership is not as widely researched as models for early career teachers. Australian research in this area includes the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE, 2018) which outlined initiatives that had an impact on teachers seeking accreditation at the higher levels through mentoring projects, including the Leadership Development Initiative that utilised a mentor structure. Reciprocal Mentoring (Paris, 2013) pairs two experts who act in the role of mentor/mentee to each other for mutual benefit. Growth Coaching is a practice of having coaching conversations with individuals/teams. These conversations lead to clearly defined actions and factors influencing the sustainability of new practices. Reflective Practice is the ability to reflect on actions and engage in a cycle of reflection. Sellers (2012) discussed that reflective practice allows the planning of actions to improve pedagogical and content knowledge to improve professional practice and initiate and sustain change.

# Focus of Study

This study was focused on the following:

* The different approaches to mentoring that teachers accredited at highly accomplished and lead engaged in whilst seeking accreditation at the higher levels.
* The types of mentoring practices that are valued by teachers at the higher levels of accreditation to support continued professional growth and development.

# Significant Learning

This experience has deepened my working knowledge of the kinds of mentoring practices and professional development available to support expert teacher development. It enabled me to explore effective practices and inspiring teacher learning environments across different education settings including, state boundaries, education systems (public, catholic and independent) and primary and secondary schools in Australia. While the settings and individual teachers represented a varied group, some common themes emerged across these education settings identified as powerful levers to support learning and in turn support the development of expert teachers. These processes supported the certification process to create Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers.

These were:

* Support from principals and systems leaders
* Mentoring and reflection with either a peer or mentor
* Utilising a HALT lens creates a focus on data and evaluation and the seeking evidence of impact

### Support from principals and systems leaders

Many HALT certified teachers identified that a key lever for their successful achievement of HALT status was principal support of the higher accreditation process to provide them with opportunities across their work to demonstrate evidence of practice against all the teaching standards. Many teachers identified that the principal did not necessarily understand all elements of the higher-level accreditation process but were supportive of the staff member engaging in accreditation and provided them with opportunities to develop and flex skills in different areas where they identified gaps in their learning and performance. This was exemplified by Leanne Clarke (Lead Teacher, St Mary’s Catholic School) who said, “When I found gaps, I discussed them with my principal so that I could find ways to fill the gaps.” She described working with her principal to map her performance against the teaching standards and identifying specific projects she could lead to allow her to meet standards that were lacking in practice.

A number of teachers further identified that mechanisms at the systems level were pivotal in their success. Some HALT’s discussed that the system they worked in had placed system and school targets on the number of teachers certified at HALT and this had a flow on effect to the individual school planning process and the funding attributed to professional learning within the school setting to support HALT development. Other teachers discussed that they had been supported through system led programs through funding, access to professional learning and support through system networks. This was supported by Luke Donnelly (Lead Teacher, St Thomas More’s Primary School) who described his own successful experience, supported by the education system in his state, as a “supportive process where there was a clear value placed on HALT’s and the HALT certification process by the system.” This top-down approach with clear system targets and funding for schools meant that that his own school placed value and support behind teachers seeking accreditation at the higher levels.

### Mentoring and reflection with Peer and/or Mentor

Sellers (2012) discussed the importance of teachers engaging in regular, authentic reflection to support their willingness and cognitive capacities to recognise ethical dilemmas and examine their own perspectives on the issues they face critically and analytically. All teachers interviewed identified the importance of engaging in reflective practices to support their own development and the use of a peer/mentor acting as a critical friend. Vanessa Dushka (Highly Accomplished Teacher, Centenary State High School) discussed that “reflecting against standards and how they look in different contexts has allowed me to grow and help others.” This awareness of self has allowed her to continue to mentor other teachers to develop and reflect on practice. Reflection against teaching standards and practice looked different in different contexts. At times teachers engaged with a peer colleague (another teacher at the same career stage), and others reflected with a mentor (above their career stage, sometimes a certified HALT or a teacher above them in school organisational structure).

While Paris (2013) focussed their work on reciprocal mentoring for beginning teachers, the practice of pairing two equal experts who act in the role of mentor and mentee to each other for their mutual benefit is one that supports the reflective HALT process too. Vicki Sheehan (Highly Accomplished Teacher, Meriden Anglican School for Girls) captured this when she said that she valued “personal support from a peer colleague who I worked with well and was able to bounce ideas off.” It was also captured by Angela Phillips (Lead Teacher, Westminster School) when she said, “I utilised a colleague who acted as a critical friend and asked; what does each standard mean? where is the impact,” how is it demonstrated? Keeping me accountable.” Both teachers cited the importance of unpacking the teaching standards with a peer to scrutinise meaning, consider how it looked in their context and classroom and how they were able to evidence impact on learning. This also allowed them to consider other perspectives on how the teaching standards could be demonstrated and evidenced. When considering her own impact as a peer mentor, Jacquie Hood (Lead Teacher, NSW Department of Education) described the feedback she received from others through the mentoring process when she said, “I never understood the impact I had on other people.”

Many teachers discussed the importance of working with peers as providing a motivating factor for the completion of the certification process. Greg Cunningham (Lead Teacher, Retired) described the importance of his work with a colleague when he said, “If I hadn’t done lead with a colleague I would have struggled.” This theme was echoed repeatedly from teachers interviewed. Not only did they value the different perspective and support provided by a peer but felt a level of accountability in completing aspects of the certification process as a result of the support provided.

Many HALTs were working in schools or within systems where they were not the only HALT and were engaging in reflective practice with a mentor who was already certified as HALT or were above their own career stage. Emma McFadden (Lead Teacher, Holy Family Catholic Primary School) explained her use of a mentor as “My biggest support were check-ins with someone who was a HALT.” Often, in conducting the interviews it became apparent that the teacher sat within a school or system cluster of expert teachers who had successfully navigated the higher-level certification process. In these instances, it was clear that the mentoring relationships provide mutual reward for mentor and mentee. In fact, the exchange of feedback was captured by Paris (2013) who described that “reciprocity was a mechanism that sustained some of the mentoring relationships in a ‘quid pro quo’ exchange of skills/knowledge.”

### HALT lens creates a focus on data and evaluation and seeking evidence of impact

A significant finding around the practices that are valued by teachers at the higher levels of accreditation to support continued professional growth and development is that the learning that takes place through the certification process changes the lens in which the teacher operates. All interviewees indicated that they felt a greater ownership of their own professional growth and were able to seek out opportunities and practices to continue to grow independently. When asked about how Ruth Winfield (Lead Teacher, Vincentia High School) has changed her practice since obtaining her HALT certification she said, “I use the teaching standards to guide my work.” All interviewed HALT’s provided a similar response, around continued use of the standards to guide every aspect of the work, decision making and professional learning. Catherine Flamos (Lead Teacher, Campbelltown Public School) described her engagement in the certification process as “the HALT process provided a framework of reflections and evaluation where any bias was removed.” She articulated the importance of seeking evidence of impact to inform decision making in her school leadership role.

Luke Fulwood (Lead Teacher, Cumberland High School) was asked about the lasting impact of the HALT process, and he said that “I have continued to reframe and refocus all professional learning against teaching standards and reflect on what each standard means.” In doing so, not only has he continued to support his own growth but the growth of the teachers in his own setting, by ensuring they have a clear understanding about how the teaching standards link to all professional learning at the school in which he leads.

Feedback from all interviewees was mirrored around comments of how the HALT process has significantly changed their practice. Andrew Cornwall (Highly Accomplished Teacher, St Bede’s Catholic College) explained that “I have a pre and post HALT mindset. If you do something it needs to have impact, it is the nexus between research and practice. Used as a base and reimagined in context.” This was a repeated theme from every HALT I engaged with, and indicated the level of autonomy HALTs demonstrate regarding identifying their own professional learning needs to continue to grow. Each interviewee was able to articulate that they continued to engage with the teaching standards to measure performance against practice, and they continued to use evaluative strategies to seek evidence of impact on their own practice.

# Conclusion

This research aimed to investigate the types of mentoring practices that are valued by teachers at the higher levels of accreditation to support professional growth and development. Through interviews, site visits and observations with teachers accredited or seeking accreditation at the higher levels, I investigated the different approaches to mentoring, support, and professional learning for HALT’s.

In summary, highly accomplished and lead teachers consistently discussed the importance of support from their principal or system through the HALT certification process. Teachers engaged in mentoring or peer reflection whilst seeking accreditation at the higher levels using reflective practices against the teaching standards with either a peer or a mentor. The consistent response from successful HALTs around practices to support continued growth and development was that they were able to operate autonomously in identifying their own professional learning needs as a result of engaging in the HALT certification process. HALTs used the HALT lens of reflection against standards with a focus on data use and seeking evidence of impact to guide their own professional learning. These common high impact practices were identified and shared with local networks of teachers working towards HALT accreditation.

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