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Leadership for Assessment Capability: Dimensions of Situated Leadership Practice for Enhanced Sociocultural Assessment in Schools

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ABSTRACT



Although there is a growing corpus of literature on teacher assessment capability, less has been written on sociocultural assessment leadership practices with its emphasis on shared capacity building. Expertise in sociocultural assessment that enhances student and teacher learning is an aspect of school leadership that can have a positive influence on teacher practice and student achievement. Research conducted with 38 principals is used to produce 16 dimensions of situated leadership for assessment capability. The article concludes with an argument for a sociocultural conception of situated leadership assessment capability which differs significantly to a clinical competence-based model of assessment leadership.

Introduction

Educational leaders work in increasingly complex schooling environments and there are calls for them to be skilled in their assessment practice (Park, 2018). Alongside pedagogy and curriculum, assessment of and for student learning communicates “dominant cultural categories and reinforce relationships of power in classrooms, schools, and societies” that leaders need to negotiate (DeLuca et al., 2019, p. 2). Leaders face a burgeoning array of challenges that can be linked with assessment: new instructional approaches, advocated (and often mandated) for practice; changes in knowledge, curricula and technologies; ongoing and evolving requirements for accountability and reporting; and the need to personalize learning for diverse student populations that encompass groups with differing socio-economic status, prior experiences, and racial, ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds (Scott, 2016). Furthermore, there is a drive on the part of educators and policymakers to intensify accountability by forging links between leadership and student outcomes (Robinson & Gray, 2019).

Leaders are expected to ensure that school-wide data collection, analysis and evaluation focus on growth in student achievement (Park, 2018) and also addresses the effectiveness of teacher professional learning (Ford & Ware, 2018). They are required to undertake rigorous analysis of student and school achievement data to determine teacher professional learning needs and facilitate strategic planning (Schildkamp et al., 2017).

In this article, we map elements of sociocultural leadership practice that support assessment capability. A sociocultural approach to assessment leadership recognizes that teacher learning in assessment is inherently situated. It is a social phenomenon where leaders interpret information and create new knowledge “based on prior knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences, and through activity and social interactions in everyday contexts” (Marsh & Farrell, 2015, p. 273). Assessment capability is where practitioners demonstrate capacity to incorporate and use assessment to effectively promote student learning (Absolum et al., 2009; Wyatt-Smith et al., 2017). “It involves situated

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professional judgment, that is the ability to draw on learning and assessment theories and experiences to purposefully design, interpret, and use a range of assessment evidence in the service of student learning” (DeLuca et al., 2019, pp. 1–2).

The role of building school-wide assessment capability is a key feature of principalship (Absolum et al., 2009; Hipkins & Cameron, 2018) where there is a focus on supporting teachers to have the knowledge and skills to analyze assessment data to make informed judgments about student learning and then adjust teaching practice (Wyatt-Smith et al., 2017). There is research to suggest that teachers “generally maintain low levels of assessment knowledge and skills, with beginning teachers particularly underprepared for assessment in schools” (DeLuca et al., 2019, p. 1). Moreover, assessment leadership involves leaders confronting and addressing potentially problematic issues in their schools (Tay & Tan, 2019), as data can indicate areas where students are being underserved and teachers and school leaders need to make changes to policy and practice. We address the question: what is involved in situated approaches to leadership that support assessment capability in teachers and students?

We commence this article with commentary on assessment capable leadership and outline-related literature around the concept of situated assessment leadership. We present research data from a qualitative case study research which investigated principals’ conceptions of assessment leadership and the associated practices they reported in their schools. We address gaps that exist in regard to research and practice pertaining to factors or conditions that contribute to effective assessment leadership (Morris, 2017). We give consideration to what is required for school leadership to foster assessment capability and produce 16 dimensions of situated assessment leadership identified in the research data. The article concludes with consideration given to how a sociocultural conception of situated leadership assessment capability differs from a competency-based model of assessment leadership.

Assessment capable leadership

In assessment capable leader and teacher practice there is both valuing of, and purposeful engagement with, how students (individually and in groups) exercise agency in mobilizing particular intellectual, human and material resources and tools, and draw on source materials, to conceptualize problems, work productively, and evaluate progress in their learning (James, 2017). Recent studies indicate that teachers are not always prepared adequately to effectively incorporate assessment into their practice, and in particular, confidence can be lacking in those teachers who are commencing their careers (Cowie & Cooper, 2017; Wayman & Jimerson, 2014). Moreover, teacher assessment capability has not been well researched or supported (DeLuca & Johnson, 2017; DeLuca et al., 2019) and our scan of the literature indicates that the same can be said for leader assessment capability. According to Klenowski (2016, p. 279) assessment capable leaders “understand and practice the fundamental principles of assessment design such as ensuring that the assessments they design are fit for purpose and that the mode of assessment impacts positively on teaching and learning.” Leader proficiency in assessment has been conceptualized in the past through a competency model (Stiggins & Duke, 2008) which we outline below.

Ten leadership competencies

Table 1 details ten leadership competencies assessment as outlined by Stiggins and Duke (2008), who leverage the work of Chappuis et al. (2005).

Many of the competencies here can be seen as a formative approach to leadership, where leaders identify what can help teachers to grow. In undertaking work to affect transformation in schools and schooling systems, assessment for learning practices, that align with an emphasis on formative assessment, have been seen as valuable to support leaders’ work in leading the learning of adults (Davies et al., 2016). However, the competencies in the table locate the actions of leaders in a vacuum,

Table 1. Ten assessment leadership competencies (Stiggins & Duke, 2008, p. 287).

Assessment leadership competencies	
1	Understands the principles of assessments for (that is, used in support of) learning and works with staff to integrate them into classroom instruction.
2	Understands the necessity of clear academic achievement targets and their relationship to the development of accurate assessments.
3	Knows and can evaluate the teacher's classroom assessment competencies and helps teachers learn to assess accurately and use the results productively.
4	Can plan, present, or secure professional development activities that contribute to the use of sound assessment practices.
5	Can accurately analyze student assessment information, use the information to improve curriculum and instruction, and assists teachers in doing the same.
6	Can develop and implement sound assessment and assessment-related policies.
7	Creates the conditions necessary for the appropriate use and reporting of student achievement information, and can communicate effectively with all members of the school community about student assessment results and their relationship to improving curriculum and instruction.
8	Understands the standards of quality for student assessments and how to verify their use in their school/district assessments.
9	Understands the attributes of a sound and balanced assessment system.
10	Understands the issues related to the unethical and inappropriate use of student assessment and protects students and staff from such misuse.

as the knowledge, skills and practices of a solitary leader. In this article, we take a situated perspective where leaders' knowledge, skills and practices operate within and are afforded by the sociocultural environments of schools, their wider communities and the broader policy contexts.

Situated assessment leadership

Over the last few decades, there has been a move away from the assumption that we can generate an evidence base for leadership through studying successful hero leaders, developing a matched list of competences and behaviors (Kennedy et al., 2013). There has been the recognition that, rather than being the domain of the individual, leadership is a phenomenon that emerges through the relationships between people. It is "an emergent outcome of fluid, uncertain, and complex relational situations" (Kennedy et al., 2013, p. 12). Situated assessment leadership has its roots in a shared, collaborative and distributed approach. The leadership of principals is central to fostering a culture of assessment in schools. Mindful of critiques around anchoring leadership practice within particular adjectival parameters (Quantz et al., 2016), we use the notion of situated assessment leadership with a view to explore socioculturally located dimensions of leader practice that can support leader assessment practice.

We conceptualize assessment leadership as a set of relational dimensions that are mediated in the socially situated contexts of schools. This differs from seeing assessment leadership as a discrete set of actions undertaken by an individual leader (Chappuis et al., 2016). Neither do we join the throng of writers who engage heavily in adjectival leadership discourse with its focus on theoretically derived leadership styles. Despite decades of research, there is little agreement about their impacts on student outcomes (Robinson & Gray, 2019). Sociocultural considerations that frame assessment as: embedded within the culture of schools; produced through collaborations between leaders, teachers and students; and focused on strengthening leader, teacher and student assessment capability are missing from Stiggins and Duke's (2008) set of competencies. We address this lacuna through reframing the competencies above as dimensions of situated leadership using examples from our case study.

The case study

The article reports data from a research project where 38 primary and secondary school principals were invited to undertake semi-structured interviews about how they lead professional learning in their schooling contexts. This paper draws on interview data where questions were

posed to the Principals about the nature of assessment leadership; asking what it is from their perspective and what it involved. The qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2017) enables us to consider the situated dimensions of assessment capability. Through our inductive analysis of the interview data we drew out the practices articulated by principals that value assessment approaches where student participation is fostered. We used the following question to guide us as we generated dimensions of assessment capability: What practices can be linked with leadership for assessment capability?

Initially, we coded the transcribed interviews in NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program. This enabled us to locate samples of data that we considered reflected dimensions of leadership that foster assessment capability in leaders, teachers and students, and assessment practices that enhance assessment capacity across the school as an organization. The pages of coded NVivo data were inductively analyzed by both of the researchers separately and emerging categories were discussed. We then mapped the samples of data onto Stiggins and Duke (2008) framework. Through our inductive process of developing categories from the coded data, we found dimensions that were additional to the a priori codes of Stiggins and Duke (2008).

The data were selected for this article on the grounds that they are illustrative of the leadership dimensions that we found across the 38 interviews. For this article, data are drawn from the interview comments of twelve principals (pseudonyms provided) in total; from ten primary schools, one intermediate and one secondary school. We do not strive to showcase a representative balance from the different schooling sectors in the data we present, but rather provide the most succinct and descriptive illustrations of the dimensions. In most instances, there were numerous references to each dimension and, in the interest of brevity, we had to be discerning around which quotations to include. In the next section, we present our framework that lays out situated assessment leadership dimensions.

Situated assessment leadership dimensions

Using qualitative data from the principal interviews, we outline 16 situated assessment leadership dimensions that are supported by school leader comments. The first 10 are reconceptualizations of the work of Stiggins and Duke (2008) that have been reframed as situated practices embedded in schooling relationships and have been numbered to indicate this alignment. We signal a further six dimensions that emerged inductively through our analysis of the interview data.

Leadership that draws on clear assessment principles on an ongoing basis (1)

Stiggins and Duke (2008, p. 287) highlight that leaders need to understand the principles of assessments for learning and work with staff to integrate them into classroom instruction. Trina, principal of a regional secondary school (Year 7–13) with 400 students, describes how she embeds formative assessment practice in her ongoing work with teachers. In her leadership, she draws on her understanding of assessment principles to support staff learning.

I don't consider that I teach general secondary students anymore, I guess I consider I am teaching other teachers so I try to use similar practices with them. In other words getting them to reflect on their practice – giving them an opportunity to look at how they are [teaching] – to actually get them to look at their learners first before they [start], and then, use that to inform how they're going to teach.

Sarah is principal of an urban Year 1–6 primary school with 200 students. She talks about the need for leadership to capitalize on the strengths of teachers who are willing early adopters and the value of modeling assessment practice for staff. She foregrounds the need to keep revisiting key concepts with middle leaders.

I need to be supporting my syndicate leaders in their leadership and they're the ones who need to be modelling it themselves. We need to be guiding and leading, and the staff team to adopt it . . . We need to keep bringing it up and we need to keep talking about it; it needs to be on the agenda all the time. There are always enthusiastic adopters. It's about harnessing their enthusiasm and what they're doing and allowing other people to see it, and to see that it's not scary and it's not difficult. It's just a different way of assessing.

Leadership for target setting that ensures accuracy of assessments (2)

Principle two reflect the necessity for clarity in setting academic achievement targets that correlate with accurate assessments (Stiggins & Duke, 2008). Marlene is a principal at an urban primary school with a roll of just over 200. She describes the necessity of clear academic achievement targets to “bring change or consolidation” yet highlights that this focus should not be at the expense of a positive climate for learning that supports student risk-taking. She works closely with the Board of Trustees in their governance role to ensure that the school wide assessment data is accurate. Here Marlene does not frame assessment leadership as her role in the school – linking it with the Board governance role.

Assessment leadership is one of the things that my Board of Trustees does. One of the responsibilities of a Board is to ensure that every child can achieve at our school and they make no excuses and offer high levels of support. My worst board meetings are my ones where I have to present assessment data. My Board gets the data a week in advance, then they go and calculate it. They check everything, they'll check the numbers. And I'll go back, I have previous year data to see if the levels of achievement are moving or not. So, for me it's quite achievable.

Leadership that develops teacher assessment competency and data literacy (3)

Assessment literacy involves the practitioner's knowledge of and skills in educational assessment that can be applied to support student learning. For leaders, this involves recognizing and evaluating teachers' classroom assessment competencies and upskilling teachers in data literacy. Mandinach and Gummer (2016, p. 367) offer the following definition of data literacy. “Data literacy for teaching is the ability to transform information into actionable instructional knowledge and practices by collecting, analyzing, and interpreting all types of data . . . to help determine instructional steps.” Bella is principal of a small regional full primary (years 1–8), with a roll of just over 200 students. She highlights the need for leaders not to assume that teachers are assessment literate and the importance of the principal's role in ensuring staff are taught to analyze data and to triangulate evidence in order to generate an on balance judgment.

You have to strategically plan for modelling assessment to staff and you actually have to teach staff how to assess . . . So, you can't make assumptions and wonder why the data is not shifting. You actually have to teach staff how to analyse data and teach them to understand what the data is telling them, understand what test does what. One of the things we do is use anecdotal information to make what we call overall teacher judgments. So, in order to be confident and competent, you've got to have thorough understanding of what it is that you are doing.

Leadership that facilitates an assessment professional development focus (4)

Teacher capacity building takes time and involves leaders working to develop consistent understandings across teachers in order to embed and sustain practices (Marsh & Farrell, 2015). Eliza is principal of an urban intermediate school (Year 7 and 8) with 650 students. She highlights that there is a time consideration around building teacher assessment literacy with teachers who have different levels of assessment knowledge.

I guess it's building the capability, so I would say that for five years we've been working really, really hard on the constructional process . . . So, you know it takes time and energy and commitment to establish teacher practice and build that understanding . . . with teachers of different ages and stages and understandings. So, this probably is the biggest challenge I reckon as just the amount of work it takes to build that real clarity around assessment and just building their consistency.

Leadership that uses accurate information to enhance curriculum and teaching and strengthen teacher capability (5)

Research suggests that teachers often need assistance to use data in a way that leads to deep changes in pedagogy and enhanced student outcomes (Mandinach & Gummer, 2016) and school leaders may lack the time, expertise, and tools to support teachers to use the information they have interpreted from data to improve curriculum and instruction (Marsh & Farrell, 2015). Assessment capable leaders use accurate information to enhance curriculum and teaching and strengthen teacher capability.

Annette, principal of a regional (Year 1–6) catholic primary school with 200 students, describes how she would like to see data produced through formal pieces of assessment. However, her primary focus is on enhancing the curriculum and teaching in the school and working with teachers to focus on student progress and achievement. She points out that, although there are parts to effective assessment provision, leadership is about moving the child through a progression of learning and having a shared vision of what that looks like and clear expectations for where the learner is headed. There is alignment here with Black and Wiliam's (1998) emphasis on premising assessment on the notion that all children can succeed. Annette notes a temporal aspect to assessment where there is a broad focus on how assessment work is cumulative.

It's keeping that clear vision of 'this is the way we're heading and what we're doing' in regards to the formal pieces of assessment. You know, the formative, this is what I am what expecting to see in each part of assessment and you know I want to see all those formal pieces. But it's keeping that clear vision and everything else you do is going to finish that year off for that child the best way that it can. So, even if you are in term one, you're building towards the end of term four and if you're in year two teaching, you're building that child to get all the way to year six and the leadership idea is that we are constantly moving and that nothing is done for no reason.

Leadership in implementing sound assessment and assessment-related policies (6)

Stiggins and Duke (2008, p. 287) highlight that leaders need to be able to develop and implement sound assessment and assessment-related policies. Carmen is principal of a regional primary school of just over 300 students. She identifies principles of assessment which involve a willingness to develop systemic knowledge, an emphasis on standardization, appropriate resourcing, data analysis, and working with staff to integrate this into classroom instruction. She articulates that leaders need an understanding of the standards of quality for student assessments and there is a need for consistent policy implementation. She has a "big picture" knowledge of assessment processes beyond the school and an interest in strengthening the leadership of teachers within the school who support sound assessment practice.

It's about having an overview of what's going on in the school in terms of achievement. It's about knowing that the processes that we have in place are being implemented across schools. So that every classroom has got similar kind of protocols. It's about putting in place resourcing, having good access to data, seeing what the pictures are, and also having a good team working with me, in terms of leaders from different areas of the school.

Leadership in supporting the use and communication of student achievement information (7)

Assessment competent leaders communicate effectively about assessment with the school community (Stiggins & Duke, 2008). Bella has a distributed view of assessment leadership and she outlines how she aims to strengthening assessment in the community through building shared understandings around aspirations for student learning.

There are different parts to it but we are all leaders of assessment . . . And I guess the same to be seen for community as well, even though parents don't see themselves that way . . . For all parts to join and be successful, everybody needs to be able to have a common understanding of what the goals are in order for that child to be able to achieve and progress . . .

Leadership in determining quality of different approaches to assessment (8)

Teachers often use assessment rubrics, criteria sheets, or a standards scheme to judge the quality of their students' work and achieve consistency and comparability of judgments (Renshaw et al., 2013). Hipkins and Cameron (2018, p. 16) note that successful leaders “value both qualitative and quantitative data and develop systems for triangulation.” Kim, assistant principal of an urban school for students from Years 1 to 8, is critical of approaches to assessment where there is an over reliance on only one form of data. She describes a vision for assessment that addresses holistic attributes for thinking about the growth of the child. This approach rejects primarily using quantitative assessment data gathered through testing as a means of determining how students are progressing and what they need.

I get a bit hung up because people just think of assessment like one running record or a maths test or whatever, so assessment should be more global than that to see the whole child and their progression.

Leadership in ensuring balance in assessment systems (9)

Balance can be achieved when the assessment practices integrate accountability with the sound use of evidence to inform rich classroom teaching and learning (Lesaux & Marietta, 2012). An emphasis of harvesting accurate data for enhancing learning and not just to prove effectiveness for teacher appraisal ensures that the emphasis remains on actions that benefit student learning and achievement. The notion of balance reflects a curriculum that is not narrowed to only focus on what is formally tested. A balanced assessment system is based on assessments from multiple levels (Chappuis et al., 2016). Kim signals a focus on balance when she draws attention to leaders valuing holistic trajectories that take account of growth in student's capacity to learn. The assessment focus is broadened to include a focus on how students are learning to learn and an interest in strengthening their ability to learn as well as literacy outcomes.

Our graduate profile, which we have a progression for, is not only about those basic competencies in your basic literacies, but it is about that global perspective of a child and how far they have come, and how they are able to be resilient when things get tough in their learning. And that's really fundamental . . . It comes back to that design for learning and to individualize that learning for each individual child to make it just the right amount of challenge.

Leadership to address unethical or inappropriate student assessment (10)

Unethical assessment practices are based on the principle that assessment should do no harm. “Do no harm’ requires that a teacher avoid behaviors that result in harm to students” (Johnson et al., 2017, p. 216) and all actions are taken in the best interest of the child. Grant, principal of an urban primary school with over 700 students, describes how purpose is an important aspect of assessment leadership. He has a distributed view of leadership and sees his role as an interventionist one, when teachers in his school add in additional unnecessary assessments and are, in effect, over assessing students. His role is to ensure that teacher assessment practice is ethical and manageable and he takes student and teacher wellbeing into account.

All our assessment practice in the school is not driven just by me, it's driven by all the team leaders and our senior leaders. Except I've just got the assessment schedule which looks a bit horrific My biggest issue, and my team's biggest challenge, is to stop teachers from adding assessment in Assessment has to be driven by leadership, but also monitored really carefully by leadership because I believe teachers are the greatest people in the world to keep adding things on and my job is to make sure that they don't drive themselves into the grave.

Teachers at Grant's school may have a different viewpoint to Grant on this subject. It is possible that his colleagues may think that he is too light on assessment requirements – with the teachers needing further information on their children's learning and achievement. Additionally, the teachers' perception of what is adequate assessment may be excessive because of perceived accountability pressures. Further research is required to explore the reasons that teachers may over assess.

Further dimensions of situated assessment leadership

Our analysis of the interview data produced further dimensions that extend those included in Stiggins and Duke's (2008) work. These include leadership that supports and strengthens teacher collaboration.

Leadership that facilitates leadership professional growth in teachers

A further leadership competency that emerged involves leaders strengthening teacher leadership to support the use of assessment that improves learning. Teacher leadership can be seen as “the process by which teachers, individually and collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement” (York-Barr & Duke, 2004, pp. 287–288). Smith et al. (2017, p. 267) have framed teacher leadership “an influential, non-supervisory process focused on improving instructional practice, with student learning as the paramount goal.” If assessment capability is to be distributed across a school in order to enhance student learning, an explicit focus on teachers as leaders of assessment practice is of value.

Bella encapsulates this assessment leadership describing how she encourages classroom teachers to see themselves as leaders of assessment. Bella actively dissuades teachers from attributing leadership responsibility purely to the lead teacher or principal.

The classroom teachers are lead teachers in assessment or a leader of assessment because they have hands on every day, leading assessment within their classrooms to increase student achievement . . . I see it as something that everybody must have a role in, if we'd have the whole school shift. The teacher is such a core component of leading assessment within the school. I do believe sometimes people look at someone and go, oh they're the lead teachers, so therefore it's their job. Whereas I encourage my staff to understand that they impact every little aspect of the school in some way or another. (Bella)

Leadership that builds collaboration around the use of data

The principals we spoke to highlighted that their leadership focused on fostering a collegial, collaborative approach to building assessment capability in their schools. Data teams involve leaders and ‘teacher leaders’ who analyze and use data collaboratively to enhance their educational practice and improve the effectiveness of their data-based decision-making (Schildkamp et al., 2016). Kim highlights how she has deliberately fostered collaboration among teachers. Teachers work in “data teams” in her school, collaborating over data analysis to gauge the impact of their teaching on student learning.

We've delved in data teams and are looking really at how you analyse data and how you look at impact that you can see in data . . . It's actually analysis of the starting point and what's our value that we've added and where to next. (Kim)

Leadership that targets power sharing with students to foster their assessment capability

Leadership can address teacher assessment capability which supports power sharing with students to foster their assessment capability. Fostering student assessment capability can involve leaders working with teachers to shift the traditional power relations in classrooms. Students have authentic input into their partnership with their teacher in ways that can support a mastery orientation, deeper learning, and ongoing student motivation (Marsh et al., 2016). Helen is the principal of a rural Year 1–8 school with 40 students. She signals how she challenges the power structures in classrooms in her leadership work around the use of assessment to support students' mastery orientation.

For me it's just focused on leading, so that children can be in control of where they are at and where they are heading, and taking that away from the teachers – well, not taking it away, but making sure the teachers realize that, 'hey, this is something the kids can do.' So, it's leading that change, really. (Helen)

Like Helen, Lane, the school leader of a large regional primary school of 747 students, notes the challenge of leading teachers to share responsibility for learning through assessment and in particular the time it takes to support students with their assessment capability.

I think it is important for teachers to release some control of the process and trust that something they can do for students, that they can get students to do. I think teachers and students and probably parents need quite a bit of support in understanding what it would look like and that it wouldn't have to be the same for everyone . . . All of that is quite hard for teachers because I guess it takes more time initially in terms of the way that they structure the learning so that that is something that students are able to do. (Lane)

Leadership that encourages children to lead their own learning

Leaders can support teachers work to purposefully to engage students in monitoring and analyzing of their own learning data (Jimerson et al., 2016). Bella recognizes the power shift that is required if students are to become self-managing and self-directed learners, able to assess their own production and processing, as leaders of their own learning.

There is importance and significance in the child being a leader of their own learning or understanding what is it that they can and can't do . . . They need to have a clear understanding of purpose - what is it they have to do in order to progress . . . So, I think children need to lead assessment from primary school right through to being an adult. (Bella)

Leadership for growing a school assessment culture

Collaboration around assessment assists teachers to learn from peers and it “allows for a fertile exchange of ideas and strategies” (Schildkamp et al., 2016, p. 229). Leaders can foster a school assessment culture where the “spirit” of assessment for learning is embraced that supports learner assessment capability (Marshall & Drummond, 2006). Leaders can see how the different teachers are engaging with professional learning and foster a culture that values teacher dialog and supports the different practitioners to grow in their professional practice. Kate is the Principal of a regional school with a roll of approximately 180 Year 0–8 students. She draws on her theory of change and uses research literature to inform her decisions.

When you bring about change within a school, everybody is in a different place. Some people are riding very close to the wave and they know it all and then there are the people who are hiding behind the trees hoping that the wave is going to pass them and no one will notice. And you as a leader get to know those people just as well as the teachers know the children in their classes. So you're actually assessing their needs, their capacities, so that they are challenged but not overwhelmed. You keep that ball continually rolling forward so that people have an understanding that it's not going to stop. It's underpinned by some really good research and you read the research and examine it and know why you're doing it. (Kate)

Kate signals how her theory of change targets shifts in school culture.

I suppose it comes in the end to the school culture, so I think the leadership depends on the school culture. If you haven't got a culture in the school where people are talking, learning and growing together then probably it's not going to happen. (Kate)

Leadership for managing tensions between accountability reporting and school-based decision making

Leaders can face tension in balancing the focus between data that is required for accountability reporting and the data needed for school-based decision-making. (Starkey & Eppel, 2019). A focus in building student assessment capability may require juggling tensions and even pushing back against systemic demands that are not in students' interest. Carmen advocates for assessment practices that are not damaging to teachers, students and communities.

Assessment leadership is also making sure that we are not constantly weighing the pig instead of feeding it. That's a big push here; we have to keep a very clear view of what's being done to us externally and our philosophy in the school in terms of assessment. There is a right wing push to do lots and lots of assessment, data-driven programs, reporting to the Ministry, all of that kind of stuff. They are forcing us down a narrower path of curriculum delivery than we would like to have. We need to constantly report to families and try to do that in a way that's not damaging to children and their learning (Carmen)

Situated dimensions for assessment capability

The data presented highlights that situated leadership assessment practice is context dependent and critical. As signaled earlier, school leaders are expected to lead and manage complex systems and often highly politicized processes of assessment in their schools (DeLuca et al., 2019; Scott, 2016; Tay & Tan, 2019). In the Aotearoa research context there is a critical dimension to leader assessment capability in that leaders can take an informed stance in the face of state edicts and push back when there are concerns that reporting assessment can do damage to students.

The sociocultural dimensions of situated assessment leadership that we identified in the study (Table 2) do not reflect a technicist model of assessment leadership. The lens of fostering student assessment capability evokes a relationality between leaders, teachers and students. DeLuca et al. (2019) make the observation that teachers grow in their careers after graduating, moving from assessment literacy (as the acquisition of assessment knowledge and skills) to assessment capability, where assessment is seen as socioculturally situated and linked with teachers' developing professional identities. We draw a parallel here in the shift from leader competency in data analysis and application for improvement (competencies as per Stiggins & Duke, 2008) to the systematic and strategic socio-cultural focus on embedding practices around the agentic enactment of assessment practices in middle leaders, teachers and students.

In Table 2 the dimensions of situated leadership practice that can enhance the assessment culture in schools have been themed into Leadership for student capability, Leadership for teacher capability, Leadership for collective capability and Leadership for system capability. The contribution of this paper has been to highlight the importance of leadership that fosters collaboration around the use of data and the agentic positioning of students who work in assessment partnerships with teachers (power sharing) so that they can demonstrate initiative and leadership for their own learning.

Table 2. Dimensions of situated leadership practice that can enhance assessment culture in schools.

Dimensions of situated assessment leadership practice
<p>Leadership for student capability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership that targets power sharing with students to foster their assessment capability • Leadership that encourages children to lead their own learning.
<p>Leadership for teacher capability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership that develops teacher assessment competency and data literacy • Leadership that facilitates an assessment professional development focus • Leadership that uses accurate information to enhance curriculum and teaching and strengthen teacher capability. • Leadership that facilitates leadership professional growth in teachers
<p>Leadership for collective capability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership that builds collaboration around the use of data • Leadership for growing a school assessment culture • Leadership for target setting that ensures accuracy of assessments • Leadership in supporting the use and communication of student achievement information
<p>Leadership for system capability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership that draws on clear assessment principles on an ongoing basis • Leadership in implementing sound assessment and assessment-related policies • Leadership in determining the quality of different approaches to assessment • Leadership in ensuring balance in assessment systems • Leadership to address unethical and inappropriate student assessment • Leadership for managing tensions between accountability reporting and school-based decision making

Cranston (2013, p. 20) has signaled the need to anchor leadership practice so that it addresses questions about “leadership for what and about what.” Findings from this research highlights leadership that is anchored in the promotion of assessment capability that enables leaders, teachers and students to work together to implement practices, processes and policies to enhance assessment practice and ultimately teacher and student learning.

It is necessary to recognize and understand how to enact leadership that is assessment capable. This may require specifically focused professional learning and development on leadership for assessment capability. This involves knowledge of both assessment theory and the capability to lead others. In short, we envisage this to involve the nexus between theory, practice, and application.

There is also an aspect of assessment capable leadership that leverages the sociocultural resources of the school community. Leaders can draw on the strengths of the teacher leaders around them in a reciprocal learning relationship. There is an openness and vulnerability to engage with new ideas in the situated spaces where practices are shared. Leaders leverage collective capability to extend and build on their own expertise.

Another implication for practice from this research involves leaders choosing to focus on learning in its broadest and deepest sense. We use a camera metaphor to illustrate how there can be a “zooming in” on students’ specific needs through collective data analysis and a “zooming out” to ensure the spirit of assessment is alive and a holistic view of student learning is taken.

All of the dimensions outlined in the findings closely relate to operational practices that can be considered essential for promoting a robust assessment culture. They can be used as a guide for school leaders’ work with teachers and their school community. It could inform leader professional learning, especially development work with a focus on strengthening teacher leadership (Russo-Netzer & Shoshani, 2019) and building both teacher and student assessment capability (Absolum et al., 2009).

There were few references to the dimension pertaining to leadership in assessment policy development and implementation in the data. Further research is warranted into whether this area that school leaders find complex to action. The principals may have not thought it relevant to mention it in the interview, although it could well be integral to their leadership practice.

Conclusion

Much has been written on the notion of leadership that enhances student outcomes and influences student learning (e.g., instructional leadership) (Robinson & Gray, 2019). However, less has been written about school leadership that fosters student assessment capability (Dixon & Hawe, 2018), where students are positioned as active decision-makers who work alongside teachers and with peers in partnerships to determine the direction of their own learning (Absolum et al., 2009). This article makes a timely contribution to frame dimensions of leader practice that can foster assessment capability across all levels of the school. Although we acknowledge the complexity of leadership and the many competing demands made of leaders, the findings from this research signals the importance of leader expertise in assessment theory and practice. Leadership competencies around the use of data and fostering teacher assessment literacy are only a part of leader assessment capability. Distributing assessment expertise, fostering collaboration and engaging with the temporality and politics of assessment are also dimensions of situated leader practice for school-wide assessment capability.

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