

How membership viewpoints can shape Language Teacher Associations

What this research was about and why it is important

Teacher Associations (LTAs) take on many roles for their memberships. This can include professional learning, networking opportunities, conferences and publications, as well as advocacy work with stakeholders and curriculum reform, among other issues. Attending to a broad range of issues presents challenges for smaller LTAs, which are often staffed by volunteers. Research into LTAs and how they function is limited at this stage. In this study, we worked with LTA members to identify the factors which influence and shape English as an Additional Language (EAL) education across a local (state-based) context. The findings provide insights into challenges and strengths in adult education and school-based contexts, including intensive English education for refugee and migrant children. These included identifying specific professional learning needs in different teaching contexts, the importance of mentoring and leadership within LTAs and the vital importance of advocacy with government and educational authorities.

What the researchers did

- This study employed a mixed-methods research methodology, Q methodology, which combines a statistical approach with interview analysis.
- There were eleven participants ranging from early career teachers through to experienced principals and regional managers.
- The participants read through 37 statements reflecting factors that impact on the teaching and learning of EAL education (e.g., professional learning, funding, policy and administrative requirements).
- Working with an online program, participants then placed the statements on a grid, identifying which statements were most important, relative to the other statements. A statistical analysis was then applied to the placement of statements.
- Participants were also interviewed about why they made the choices they did.
- The two sets of data were then combined to illustrate the most significant issues for participants in the field of EAL education.

What the researchers found

- Viewpoints formed around context-specific issues, specifically, those working with refugee and migrant children in relatively well-funded programs; those working with adult refugees and migrants, and those working with EAL students in mainstream schools.
- As different EAL providers are funded by different governmental organisations, access to funding for professional learning varies and results in inequitable professional learning opportunities.
- While EAL teachers in schools feel well supported, they require additional supporting in providing mentoring within their schools for generalist classroom teachers.
- Within an LTA, mentoring and leadership, as well as personal reflection all play a critical role in the ongoing cultivation of a strong professional culture and a strong association.

Things to consider

- Despite the diverse education contexts represented in this small-scale study, a positive conclusion is the high level of professionalism that participants identified, along with their commitment to not only their own ongoing professional learning, but also that of other educators across the EAL field.
- In-depth analysis of membership viewpoints can provide a valuable source of information for LTAs and in the planning to ensure their activities meet the needs of their memberships. This is particularly important given the wide range of EAL contexts represented in LTA memberships and the often limited budgets of LTAs.
- The advocacy work of LTAs is an under-researched area and would benefit from a substantial research focus

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