

**Learning about teachers learning to lead:  
Reflections on themes in the teacher leadership literature and their  
manifestation in a teacher leadership development program in Florida**

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**Introduction**

The concept of teacher leadership has gained more attention in recent years as practitioners and researchers have embraced the role that teachers play in education reform. This focus has been evidenced in the United States with a new section for research focused on teacher leadership within the American Educational Research Association beginning with the 2015 annual meeting and internationally by a special edition of the journal *Professional Development in Education* (Swaffield & Alexandrou, 2012), among other similar developments. This attention among academics reflects the interest among schools and school administrators in “nonsupervisory, school based instructional teacher leader roles as a way to improve teachers’ instruction and enhance student learning” (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2010, p. 49). While the idea that teachers must play a part in defining and implementing school change initiatives is not new, the role teachers play in this process is becoming more recognized and often more formalized through the creation of teacher leadership roles.

There are important implications of this newfound reliance on teacher leadership for the schools that employ teacher leaders as well as the institutions and

organizations that prepare them. It becomes essential to understand the nature of effective teacher leadership work, the characteristics of effective teacher leaders, the conditions under which teacher leadership develops, and the impact teacher leadership has on school culture, teaching practice, and student learning. In their extensive review of the literature, York-Barr and Duke (2004) pointed out that quite a bit is already known about the dimensions of teacher leadership work and the characteristics of effective teacher leaders. However, they pointed to a dearth of research on the conditions under which teacher leadership develops and the effects that it has on schools. Much of the recent research has tried to address this gap. Simultaneously, school administrators and institutions of higher education have created programs to prepare teacher leaders. The purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) Explore three themes drawn from a review of teacher leadership literature, and (2) Share empirical evidence from a study of a teacher leadership development program in Florida as illustrations of the themes.

### **Methodology**

This paper draws on a previously published review of the literature on teacher leadership (Poekert, 2012). Within this review, publications that identified teacher leadership, shared decision-making, teacher professionalism, instructional leadership, or distributed leadership as key terms were collected by using the Google Scholar search tool and ERIC database to identify relevant studies. In addition, reference lists of scholarly works were examined to identify publications that may have been overlooked. Of the 48 publications identified, 26 were used

within the review. Four criteria were used to select publications: (1) the work was published between 2004 and the present; (2) the work related to the development and practice of teacher leadership in schools; (3) the work was vetted as a relevant contribution to the field through publication in a refereed journal or similar process; and (4) the work directly reported or drew on empirical evidence related to teacher leadership. Thus, only reviews of research, original qualitative and quantitative studies, and empirical descriptions of teacher leadership work that provide 'portraits of practice' were included in this review. The review was representative of the literature, but not entirely exhaustive.

In addition, a qualitative, interview-based study was conducted to examine the perceived impact of a graduate degree program on teachers' beliefs and practices as well as to identify features of the program that contributed to and/or detracted from that impact. Participants were recruited based on their enrollment in the job-embedded graduate degree program. Twenty-nine of thirty teachers in the inaugural cohort of the program, representing 14 schools, consented to participate in the study. Data was collected through hour-long, semi-structured interviews conducted over the phone. Interviews were transcribed live in as much detail as possible. Interviewers returned to the transcripts immediately following the interview to add details missed during the initial transcription effort and to record anecdotal notes regarding the interview process.

The results of these two research processes (the literature review and the qualitative interview study) are combined within this paper to provide another look at the themes drawn from the literature review. This paper is intended to provide

key lessons learned from the available literature on teacher leadership and to illustrate these themes with data from the interview study. The following section explores the three themes in more detail.

## **Themes**

### **1. Teacher leaders have backgrounds as accomplished teachers, which demonstrates their expertise and gives them credibility.**

In their 2004 review, York-Barr and Duke pointed to teachers' classroom effectiveness as central to their credibility as leaders in the eyes of their colleagues. The importance of a successful background in classroom teaching was confirmed in Danielson's (2007) discussion of the characteristics of effective teacher leaders. In essence, the track record of classroom success is what gives teacher leaders the confidence to take on leadership and authority among their fellows.

The interview study provided some examples of this theme as teachers pointed to their development as master teachers and teacher researchers as important in their recognition as leaders by others, including the school administration. One teacher participant shared: "Administrators ask me to present more based on my classes – they see the changes we are doing to take initiative to improve the school as a whole" (Catherine)<sup>1</sup>. Another shared:

I used to be more of a shy teacher, not in front of the kids, but if I had to speak in front of my co-workers, I'd be really shy and I wouldn't feel comfortable doing it. It's definitely gotten me out of my shell. I stand up in faculty meetings all the time now and announce things...or bring up meetings or do protocols [structures for professional dialogue] with them. So my principal definitely put us in charge of doing protocols and meetings. So,

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<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

yeah I've gotten more outspoken for sure. I feel like I've become a better teacher just with the students (Hermione).

The idea that teacher leaders must have credibility as effective teachers may seem simple and perhaps even obvious, but its importance cannot be overstated. In order to engage their colleagues as peers, teacher leaders must have this perceived authority in order to be able to influence their colleagues and move reform efforts.

**2. Teacher leadership is centered on a vision of leadership built on influence and interaction, rather than power and authority.**

For this reason, distributed leadership models of school leadership align well with the concept of teacher leadership. Distributed leadership theorists describe leadership as being “stretched out” over a variety of stakeholders within a school and argue that “leadership practice is constituted – defined or constructed – in the interaction of leaders, followers, and their situation in the execution of particular leadership tasks” (Spillane et al., 2004, p. 10). Such a model of educational leadership has been connected with improvements in student performance (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010), and it suggests that leadership is an organizational quality that is practiced and shared among a variety of individuals within the school. Surely, these individuals must include teachers.

Like other authors, Danielson (2007) pointed out that teacher leadership can be both formal (i.e., instructional coaches and department chairs) and informal (i.e., taking initiative to solve a program). Drawing on the work of Michael Fullan, Danielson further explained, “effective teacher leaders exhibit important skills,

values, and dispositions” in that they are “open-minded and respectful of others’ views. They display optimism and enthusiasm, confidence, and decisiveness” (p. 16). Such characteristics are essential because leadership, as a form of interaction, is based in the development and maintenance of professional, collaborative relationships. Further, these characteristics are arguably even more important among teacher leaders who cannot simply rely on formal positions of authority to motivate colleagues. As peer leaders, they must exert their influence through different means: horizontal, rather than hierarchical, relationships with colleagues.

Within the interview study, nineteen of the 29 teachers described an increase in their collaboration with their colleagues. Carrie explained that she now listens more to colleagues and offers feedback rather than attempting to do things by herself. Now she’s able to “talk with my administrators to arrive at solutions.” They ask her for advice and rely on her. Serving as a resource or “go to” person in schools is a key form of teacher leadership.

Working with the formal leadership of school administrators is another important form of teacher leadership. While at times teachers work together with school leaders, there are also times when teacher leaders must resist the demands of administrators when they believe that the demands being made of them go against the best interest of the students. The ability to stand one’s moral ground can be empowering, as one teacher participant described: “I feel more in control of my own decisions. I can go against anything that they [administrators] might require that I think won’t work, because I have the background to back it up. I can prove to them that I’m right. It empowers us definitely” (Benny).

Teacher leaders' positions within schools require them to exert influence horizontally to their peers or vertically up the hierarchy to school administrators who supervise and evaluate them. It is this absence of organizational power and authority that therefore requires teacher leadership to be centered on influence and interaction. Only through such means can teachers achieve their leadership goals.

### **3. Effective professional development leads to teacher leadership leads to effective professional development.**

Professional development is both a cause and outcome of teacher leadership. First, professional development is required to develop teachers as leaders and to assist administrators in reconceptualizing their roles as "head learners" (Yendol-Hoppey & Dana, 2010) who distribute leadership. Effectively done, professional development serves as the impetus for the professionalization of teaching and the development of teachers' leadership skills toward influencing and improving the practice of their colleagues (Murphy, 2005). In short, teacher leadership can result from effective professional development for teachers and principals. This causal connection is currently being established through empirical research (Huerta et al., 2008; Watt et al., 2010).

More than just an outcome of professional development, however, teacher leadership can also create effective professional development that is embedded within the school context. Teachers that become leaders facilitate effective, school-based professional development for their teacher colleagues by leading communities of practice that collectively examine and improve teaching practice

through ongoing inquiry (e.g., Smeets & Ponte, 2009). Furthermore, teacher leaders themselves continue to learn and develop in the enactment of teacher leadership at their respective school sites. In essence, these teachers learn through their own leadership (MacBeath & Dempster, 2008). Thus, teacher leadership leads to improved professional learning for colleagues and the teachers themselves. In this sense, the learning that results from teacher leadership can be employed as a lever in overall school improvement efforts that seek to improve instructional practice and enhance student performance.

Within the interview study, fifteen of the 29 teachers described leading some form of professional development, including providing presentations, leading teacher inquiry groups, and mentoring colleagues at their schools. Some of these teachers better illustrated the first part of the statement: professional development leads to teacher leadership. One teacher participant described how one course within the graduate degree program pushed her out of her comfort zone to lead a workshop for her colleagues, saying, “We just did a PD [professional development session] that I was really nervous about. First time actually did PD to my, for my colleagues, so it really helped me. I can do it and you know, I was very nervous at first and then it was a great experience, so I’d be willing to do it again” (Allison). It was a requirement of her coursework that Allison take leadership and conduct a workshop for her colleagues. In so doing, the coursework served as professional development for Allison that led to her teacher leadership.

Other teacher respondents better illustrated the second half of the statement: teacher leadership leads to professional development. Roberta described



how she works differently with her colleagues as a leader: “I am more willing to assist, and I go to the classrooms and model the lessons for them...The principal said that instead of paying the teachers to go to PDs [professional development sessions], she would rather have them come to my class and for me to model and help them.” Together, these comments illustrate the vital connection between professional development and teacher leadership: one begets the other in a virtuous cycle that can lead to improvements in teaching and learning.

### **Conclusion**

This paper extracts major themes on teacher leadership from a review of the research literature and adds empirical evidence to support these conclusions and illustrate these examples. It is hoped that these three themes related to teacher leaders’ required background in successful teaching, their indirect pathways for leadership through influence and interaction, and their vital connection to professional development in schools will inform both research on and practice in the recruitment, selection, preparation, and support of teacher leaders as they become more central figures in school reform efforts.

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