SNAKES OR LADDERS?

AN EXAMINATION OF THE EXPERIENCES OF TWO TEACHER LEADERS

RETURNING TO CLASSROOM TEACHING[*]

Elizabeth Munroe, *St. Francis Xavier University*

Teachers who have held leadership roles at the school, district, or provincial level have the potential to contribute to student and school success when they return to classroom teaching. The contrasting experiences of two teacher leaders who returned voluntarily to classroom teaching are analyzed using Owens's (2004) social constructivist theory of role definition. These case studies offer insight into a teacher career transition that has been considered infrequently in current research. As such, they may inform the decisions of district personnel, school administrators, and returning teacher leaders so that such transitions feel less like sliding down a snake and more like climbing a ladder.

Introduction

In the game of Snakes and Ladders, the goal is to reach the top, the one hundredth square. Starting at the first square, a player rolls the dice. If she is lucky enough to land on the base of a ladder, she can climb up and skip many numbers. But, if the player lands on a snake's head, she must slide down to the snake's tail, thus regressing back through the numbers. Because the goal of the game is to reach the hundredth square, moving up ladders is positive and sliding down snakes is negative.

In terms of a professional career, climbing the ladder is similarly widely accepted as positive. Most steps up the career ladder bring increased salary, responsibility, respect, and self-affirmation. For teachers, going up the ladder may mean moving from classroom to school-based teacher leader or administrator, or to district or provincial leadership roles. Educators converse about such career moves using phrases such as "taking a new position as . . . ," "accepting the challenge to . . . ," or "moving on to . . . ," and most see the steps up the ladder in a positive light. When an expert teacher first moves into leadership, colleagues may comment about "taking the best teachers out of the classroom," but usually such a move is seen as a ladder. What terminology is used when a teacher leader who has worked in a formal leadership position takes a classroom teaching position again? Most frequently, the teacher leader is going "back" to the classroom. Is that career move similar to landing on a snake? Are there underlying tones of negativity in the phrase "going back to the classroom"? And, if that is the case, why?

Recently, I have sought to understand the experiences of five Canadian teacher leaders during their first year of returning to classroom teaching. For some of these teacher leaders, their return to the classroom was involuntary and, yes, their return seemed somewhat like sliding down a snake. For two of the educators, Susan and Debbie (pseudonyms), the career shift was completely voluntary—they returned to classroom teaching because they missed working with children. Did a voluntary return result in a more positive transition? Certainly both these teachers described considerable joy and satisfaction in working with students and being part of a school staff once again. However, Susan experienced specific sources of stress that at times made her feel as if she were sliding down a snake (Munroe, in press). Debbie had a far more positive experience, and the transition felt like climbing a ladder. The stories of Susan and Debbie are examined here, with particular reference to their familiarity with the school they were returning

to and how their roles were defined there. Those differences seem pivotal to their contrasting experiences.

The Potential Contribution of Teacher Leaders

Before writing specifically about Susan's and Debbie's experiences, I consider what has been written about the potential of teacher leaders to contribute to school improvement, the complexities of the teacher leadership role, and the experiences of other teacher leaders who have returned to classroom teaching. A *teacher leader* has been defined as "a teacher who assumes formally or informally one or more of a wide array of leadership roles to support school and student success" (Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, *n.d.*, p. 37). *Formalized teacher leadership* is usually reflected in named positions, such as department head, mentor, or curriculum specialist, whereas *informal teacher leadership* is often described in terms of actions, such as "coaching peers to resolve instructional problems, encouraging parent participation, working with colleagues in small groups and teams, modeling reflective practice, or articulating a vision for improvement" (York-Barr & Duke, 2004, p. 263). Formal teacher leadership roles may remove the teacher from classroom teaching part time or full time and may even remove the teacher from the school, as was the case with the two teacher leaders featured in this paper.

In this era of emphasis on accountability and school improvement (Wood & Myer, 2011), teachers need to continue to learn about and implement effective pedagogical practices. External, single event professional development sessions are recognized as largely unsuccessful in changing practice (Gulamhussein, 2013; Joyce & Calhoun, 2010). Increasingly, the effectiveness of teachers working together within the school to improve their practice is being highlighted, and numerous authors have examined the role of teacher leaders in this setting

(Barnett, 2013; Berry, Daughtrey, & Wieder, 2010; Crowther, Ferguson, & Hann, 2009; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Murphy, 2005; Nelson, Deuel, Slavit, & Kennedy, 2010; Schmoker, 2005). Teacher leaders may act as resource providers, data coaches, curriculum specialists, instructional specialists, classroom supporters, mentors, learning facilitators, and catalysts for change (Harrison & Killion, 2007). As such, they may contribute to teacher professional development (Lieberman & Miller, 2004) and have a positive impact on school improvement (Muijs & Harris, 2006). However, concrete findings confirming teacher leaders' effect on student achievement "may be difficult to achieve due to the fluid, complex, and context-specific nature of TL [teacher leadership]" (Taylor, Goeke, Klein, Onore, & Geist, 2011, p. 921).

Complexities in Teacher Leadership

Many authors have emphasized the complexity surrounding the role of teacher leader, whether external to the school or part of the staff (Angelle & Schmid, 2007; Lynch & Ferguson, 2010; Smylie, 1999). Considering the hierarchy implied in the term *leader* (Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2008), it seems paradoxical for a teacher to be both a "trusted colleague and a resource for instructional improvement" (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2011, p. 48). The adoption by some administrators of "socially constructed, collected, distributed, shared, or co-leadership" approaches (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2013, p. 112) may serve to disrupt the traditional authoritarian concept of leadership to the extent that teacher leaders may work effectively with other teachers, but Donaldson, Johnson, Kirkpatrick, Marinell, Steele, and Szczesiul (2008) warned that "the norms of autonomy, egalitarianism, and seniority continue to exert great influence among teachers" (p. 1089) and may block teachers learning from each other.

Crafton and Kaizer (2011) have confirmed the importance and potential effectiveness of teachers learning together regularly within the school setting, but they have also highlighted the sensitivity and finesse needed by teacher leaders in order to overcome issues of hierarchy and power. Teacher leaders do develop "skills that enable them to work effectively and collaboratively with colleagues" (The Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, *n.d.*, p. 27). These facilitation skills, in addition to "critical content and pedagogical knowledge" (p. 23) are likely to be part of the repertoire of teacher leaders returning to classroom positions.

Teacher Leaders Returning to Classroom Teaching

While there is considerable literature describing the contribution of teacher leaders to school improvement, relatively little is known about formal teacher leaders who return to the classroom. Steinbacher-Reed and Powers (2011) have reported that teacher leaders who served as learning coaches, but then returned to classroom teaching because of budget cuts, experienced "a variety of emotions, ranging from excitement at the thought of returning to the classroom to sadness or resentment about losing the identity of coach" (p. 69). These authors have suggested that teacher leadership practices "can be combined relatively easily with the duties of a classroom teacher" (p. 69). However, they have also cautioned returning teacher leaders to carefully consider how much time they want to devote to leadership and noted the necessity of release time to plan and do this work, which required the support of the school administration. Former teacher leaders who had been reassigned to specialist roles (such as reading specialist) or roles with some formalized leadership (such as curriculum chair or team leader) were more able to continue with some form of teacher leadership.

Fiarman (2007) interviewed eight teacher leaders in Maryland, who were mandated to

return to school-based positions for a minimum of two years after working for three years

outside their schools. Those teachers described their return to school-based positions as "culture

shock" (p. 32) and many of them did not remain as classroom teachers or even as school staff

members beyond the time specified by contractual agreement. They expressed frustration and

disappointment because they were unable "to put into practice the expanded authority, expertise,

and influence which they had learned and valued while working in the leadership role" (p. 2).

They missed the opportunities for collegial interaction, and they felt underutilized. These

concerns were raised more often by the teacher leaders who returned to full time classroom

teaching than those who returned to positions with some formalized leadership opportunities,

such as department heads who had a part-time teaching role.

Teacher Leadership and Role Theory

Prior to their conversations with me, Susan and Debbie had both worked in full time,

formal curriculum leadership roles outside of their schools. Upon her return to classroom

teaching, Susan desired no designated leadership role, although she intended and expected to

serve, informally, as a teacher leader. In contrast, Debbie returned with a more defined teacher

leadership role alongside her classroom teaching responsibilities. Before examining the

experiences of Debbie and Susan, some understanding of role theory is helpful.

In a social constructivist view of role theory, role formation is understood to be the

result of a dynamic interactive process between and among individuals. Schmidt (2000)

explained that "roles are fundamentally about purposes—ideal and actual—expected by and

taken from others or created and made by oneself" (p. 830). When individuals have conflicting

or contradictory notions of a role, problems may arise.

Owens's (2004) definitions illustrate the complexity of a theory that conceives *role* as being co-constructed between individuals and groups. *Role description* refers to the actual behaviour of an individual performing a role (as described by that individual); *role prescription* is the relatively abstract idea of what the general norm in the culture is for the role; *role expectation* is the expectation that one person has of the role behaviour of another; and *role perception* is the perception that one has of the role expectation that another person holds for him or her. Confusion over role expectation and role perception may lead to *role conflict*. The above definitions of role suggest that issues of identity, power, authority, and influence may all be related to the social construction of role.

Methodology, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

Busher, Hammersley-Fletcher, and Turner (2007) have cautioned that studies about teacher leadership "often consider leaders and leadership impersonally, agglomerating evidence from several leaders to paint a broader picture of their work without focusing on the specific lived experiences of particular leaders" (p. 406), and they have recommended that researchers "carry out deeper investigations of the complex dynamics" (p. 407) of teacher leadership. In response to that recommendation, I present qualitative research data, focused not only on understanding the experiences, knowledge, and practices of particular research participants, but also on how they interpret and make meaning of their worlds (Merriam, 2009).

The data for this paper derives from two case studies. In each case, the teacher who returned to classroom teaching constituted the *bounded system*, the "single entity . . . around which there are boundaries" (Merriam, 2009, p. 40). Limiting the case to each single teacher was a purposeful choice as participants wished to remain as anonymous as possible. They felt that

including school administrators, other teachers in the school, or the district's human resources personnel in the study would have jeopardized that anonymity.

Data collection for Susan covered a 12-month period from the time she left her provincial consultant position (July) until she completed her year as Grade 1 teacher (June). Hearing that Susan was returning to a teaching position, I approached her to take part in a study documenting her experiences. During 15 face-to-face or electronic conversations (60 to 90 minutes duration), I recorded Susan's thoughts, feelings, and descriptions of her experiences. She experienced considerable enjoyment and satisfaction upon her return to classroom teaching, but she often expressed bewilderment about various tensions. These sources of stress came to dominate the research conversations, possibly because they were entirely unanticipated, but also because she felt free to discuss them in the anonymous space of the research.

Through a process of reading and re-reading the transcripts of our conversations, I eventually sorted the experiences that Susan found troubling into six categories. Towards the end of the school year, I carried out a member check (Merriam, 2009), sending Susan the notes taken during the conversations and my analysis of the sources of tension. Following this, Susan and I had an extended meeting during which she ascertained that (a) the notes captured the core of her experiences, and (b) the six areas of tension that I had identified were the main sources of perplexity about her role in her school. The details of Susan's experience were presented in Munroe (2010). A deeper analysis of Susan's experience (Munroe, in press) was framed around York-Barr and Duke's (2004) three "conditions conducive to cultivating and supporting teacher leadership as well as those that challenge or diminish its effectiveness": (a) school culture, (b) roles and responsibilities, and (c) structures (pp. 9–10). That analysis illustrated the complex inter-connectedness of the identified six sources of tension.

Documenting Susan's journey sparked my interest in collecting the stories of more teacher leaders as they returned to the classroom. Stake (2003) has referred to this process as "instrumental or collective" case study work (p. 138), in that "the choice of case is made to advance understanding of that other interest" (p. 137). I contacted leaders of various school districts and consulted with faculty members and graduate students to find potential participants. Eventually, I documented the experiences of four additional returning teacher leaders. I collected the data for those case studies during four conversations with each teacher leader (approximately 90 minutes each) during the first year of his or her return to classroom teaching. The research conversations were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed by a research assistant. I read through the transcripts, removed or modified information that might have reduced the participants' anonymity, and then invited them to conduct a member check (Merriam, 2009). This enabled the participants to request changes and ultimately to authorize the use of the agreed-upon data in research publications. Although I was aware of possible sources of tension in a return to classroom teaching (from the analysis of Susan's case), I did not reveal the findings of that study to the new participants, preferring instead to let the stories unfold and to hear the particular experiences of each individual. This approach is consistent with Stake (2003) who has proposed that each case should still be "looked at in depth, its contexts scrutinized, its ordinary activities detailed" (p. 137).

As the data collection progressed, I was intrigued by the similarities and differences between Debbie, one of the new participants, and Susan. Debbie and Susan had held similar curriculum leadership roles, and they both had returned voluntarily to classroom teaching. However, Debbie encountered considerably less stress in this transition than did Susan. In this paper, I use the six areas of tension experienced by Susan as a framework to describe Debbie's

experience and propose some explanations regarding the differences in their transitions from formal teacher leader to classroom teacher. All quotes in this section of the paper derive from the transcribed research conversations approved by Susan and Debbie.

Introducing Susan and Debbie

Susan was an elementary school teacher with 16 years of experience teaching in three of her school district's 30 schools, in urban and rural settings surrounding a large Canadian city. After leaving the classroom, she worked for two years on a team that supported school improvement efforts in her district's schools, offering workshops, gathering resources, and working directly with teachers in schools where the provincial achievement test results warranted targeted support. Her next two years of formal leadership were at the provincial level, focused on the implementation of a new English Language Arts curriculum. She organized presentations in her area of the province, and she herself led many workshops. Throughout these years, Susan was constantly augmenting her own professional learning, attending conferences and reading current literature.

After these four years, Susan decided to return to classroom teaching because she really missed working with children. The position at Susan's former school had not been held for her, so she accepted a position teaching Grade 1 in another school in her district. During her interview, the principal asked if Susan wanted to be part of the school improvement leadership team, but she declined. She was adamant that she wanted to get to know the culture of the school, to fit in with the teaching staff, and not to appear like a "know-it-all."

Debbie had been a high school mathematics teacher for nearly 20 years. She taught in a K–12 school with a student population of approximately 500, in a rural area in Canada. She had

been seconded from her classroom to a formal leadership position outside the school four times: two years in a teacher leadership position with her school district, six months as a curriculum developer for the provincial department of education, and one year as a lecturer in the Faculty of Education at a nearby university. Most recently, she had served for two years as a teacher leader for her school district, supporting teachers of mathematics. She offered workshops and gathered resources for the district's 20 schools, but the majority of her time was spent working with individuals or groups of teachers. Throughout these years, Debbie, like Susan, was constantly engaged in her own professional learning, attending conferences and reading current literature. She also started courses to earn a Master's degree in education.

Debbie returned to classroom teaching because she needed a "kid fix." In particular, she missed the close relationships with students and colleagues that were impossible in her district-level teacher leader role. Because she had been seconded, a position was held for her at her former school, and she indicated that she would not have taken the teacher leadership position without that guarantee. In planning for her return, the principal met with Debbie to discuss how she might support the school's teachers in the area of mathematics. Debbie's teaching load was slightly reduced, and a block of time to work with teachers was included in her timetable.

Differing Experiences of Six Possible Tensions

In this section, I present examples of Susan's and Debbie's experience in their return to classroom teaching using the six sources of tension described in Munroe (in press) as a framework. These sources of tension are a) defining their roles, b) acknowledgement and recognition, c) opportunities—but no time—for leadership, d) brief professional conversations, e) self-imposed expectations, and f) a unique experience. Upon reading this paper, one might

11

think it is very obvious that Susan would have experienced these tensions, so that her career transition felt like a slide down a snake at times. It is important to note, however, that the data about Susan was gathered throughout the process of her career transition. In retrospect, the complexity of her experience may be easily understandable, but especially in the early months of her return to the classroom, Susan was genuinely surprised and baffled at her own emotional reactions and the degree to which she felt tension in this stage of her career.

Defining Their Roles

Susan purposefully returned to teaching with no defined role other than classroom teacher. However, part of her intention, disclosed only to me, was to serve as a teacher leader through modeling and interacting with teachers at her school and contributing to committee work. She hoped to lead by example, not by authority. Susan's plan was to find out "what the community of the school was like first and quietly start to lead from there." She offered to join her school's professional learning committee, realizing that she had a lot of experience to offer, but told the committee chair that she would not step forward to be perceived as knowing everything. Susan's insistence on having no defined leadership role led to some tension. She had to continuously pause and make conscious decisions about when to go along with ideas in order to fit in as a new member on staff and when to espouse her pedagogical beliefs if they differed from those of her colleagues. Regarding her membership on the team of Grade 1 teachers, she explained:

> I want to walk softly; I don't want to insult any one. There has to be some
> trust among us; otherwise, they might think that I'm questioning their
> teaching. I need to pull my weight.

So, Susan helped out with arranging the Grade 1 field trip, even though she did not fully agree with what the team was planning, since it only affected one day in the school year. However, she did not use the math workbooks that had been ordered for her students because using workbooks was contrary to the way she intended to teach math and she did not feel she could go against her beliefs for that length of time.

Upon Debbie's return to classroom teaching, the school administration introduced her to the staff as a resource for support in mathematics with time in her schedule for this. Her leadership work was steered by the administrator's analysis of school results and knowledge of teachers' workloads. Debbie herself was careful not to be "somebody coming in with all the answers telling people what to do." She described her work with other teachers as being focused on the students, as team teaching, and not as mentorship.

As she was leading a school-wide professional development day, Debbie felt "some resistance from a couple of teachers." She realized that in her previous role as a district leader, she would have had the authority to say "you have to do this," but in her school role she was essentially a peer of the other teachers. She admitted, "it was definitely uncomfortable for me." She discussed the incident with the vice-principal later, and he suggested that she was not exactly the same as the other teachers. Debbie remembered him saying, "You may think you're a teacher, but I think the way people look at you at the school is you're a little different from them . . . the expertise and the knowledge that you have give you the authority." So, although Debbie did experience some tension, it was quickly relieved through her discussion with the school administration.

Acknowledgement and Recognition

Susan did not want to be presented to her new colleagues as an expert in English Language Arts, but she was confused by the way she felt when her past leadership experiences were not acknowledged and utilized. She soon realized that her new administrator and her colleagues were unaware of her past leadership work. When the school professional learning committee brought in a consultant to lead a session that Susan herself had led in her previous role, she was confused by her own reactions. She explained, "it's not that my feelings are hurt; I'm just questioning it. . . . When should I say 'this is the expertise that I have'? . . . I don't see myself as part of the community yet . . . that's why I'm just in this big quandary."

In contrast, Debbie commented that she felt "very valued" by both the administration and the teachers in her school. In the fall, Debbie reported that one teacher had said to her, "you know, I'm really glad that you're back. Students are really lucky to have you, and we're really lucky to have you here at the school." Debbie commented,

> Probably administration has been supportive because they know they're getting a better teacher, that if I stayed in my classroom I'd probably still teach the way that I did 20 years ago, which was okay, but is certainly not the way that I teach now.

Opportunities—but No Time—for Leadership

Although her leadership was not formally named, Susan did take on teacher leader roles. She voluntarily mentored a new teacher, and she served on school committees. At her administrator's request, she analyzed the school's achievement scores, and she was released from her classroom teaching for this. Susan was pleased to have the opportunities for this leadership, but she was frustrated because she had no time to follow through. She could offer support to the other teachers only during after school hours. The teachers in the school gradually became aware

14

of Susan's experience and expertise, but this actually added to Susan's stress. In the spring, she

commented:

> I don't have the time. The teachers are asking me questions, but I can't figure
> out how to share myself with others when I can't do everything I need to do
> for the kids in my own classroom. I'm not doing a good job of it. . . . I feel
> like I've let people down in a way. I have failed miserably with what I have
> wanted to do and not had the time to do.

Debbie's weekly teaching schedule purposefully included blocks when she could work

with other teachers. When the administration asked her to perform other tasks, she was released

from her classroom duties. Debbie summed it up saying, "I have the best of both worlds . . . still

getting the opportunity and still being utilized in a leadership role [but] within the school

setting." These words certainly make it seem as if Debbie saw herself as moving up a ladder in

her career.

Brief Professional Conversations

Both Susan and Debbie commented on the lack of time in teachers' typical schedules

for professional conversations. As Debbie explained,

> we get caught up in this day and it's just go, go, go, go, go, and then after
> school you're rushing for the photocopier, you're rushing to get things made,
> and you're lucky once in a while if you can actually grab a few minutes to
> chat with a colleague and usually when you do it's because there's a crisis
> situation about a student or . . . something's not working. But just to sit and
> have a professional conversation about best practice or current research or
> about what's working and what's not working never happens.

In their teacher leadership roles, Susan and Debbie had planned and facilitated hours of

professional learning, and they were used to having the time to explore the ideas reflected in new

curriculum documents with teachers. Returning to the school setting, Susan expressed some

frustration with hearing teachers' misconceptions about curriculum changes, knowing that she

could help them understand more fully but had no opportunity to do so. She proclaimed, "there's

nothing I can say in a staff room over lunch that will encourage change." However, she did

occasionally ask the teachers "little leading questions to get them thinking about their thinking."

She described her approach as "dancing around," saying,

> I'm always having conversations with people and I'm also having a
> conversation with myself. I am listening to what they say and I'm trying not
> to be judgmental, and I'm trying to decide where do I say something and
> where do I just let it go.

Mostly, Susan resigned herself to the fact that in-depth professional conversations were not

possible.

Debbie, on the other hand, had specific times to work with teachers when she could

have those longer conversations and in addition she was able to support teachers as they

implemented new strategies. Her enthusiasm about this shone through as she explained:

> I'm very excited, with the 5s and 6s we did a little session on mental math and
> now I'm working with the teachers and working with the students and kind of
> showing some different strategies and doing some focused lessons and some
> work with them, which is pretty neat because I'm getting to work with the
> teachers and I'm also getting to work with the students and kind of showing it,
> which I really like. I mean, it's one thing to work with a teacher and say
> "here's the important information," but when you can go in and actually team
> teach and show it and have them ask questions and then lead it themselves,
> it's really positive.

She contrasted this process of working with a few teachers on a regular basis with her previous

role. Then, her services had been in such demand that, "I really didn't get to know anybody. I

popped in, I showed them something, and then I ran out the door to get to my next place."

Self-Imposed Expectations

It is perhaps not surprising that a returning teacher leader would have high standards and expectations for his or her teaching. Having taught other teachers about new ideas in curriculum and instruction, both Susan and Debbie were looking forward to implementing those strategies in their own classrooms. However, each admitted that she was not achieving what she might have hoped, in terms of her own teaching, and they both experienced some tension in this area, feeling disappointed in themselves. Interestingly, both Susan and Debbie were quite philosophical about this by the end of the first few months in the classroom. Susan summed up the situation by saying, "I know I know too much . . . I will not be satisfied with myself this year. I have to let go of the fact that it's going to be brilliant this year." Debbie commented,

> I've had numerous times when I sat down and thought "I'm supposed to be doing this and I'm not doing this" . . . but I forgive myself and move on. I'm doing some good things, I'm doing some things not so great, and I'm doing some things just to survive, and that's what it is.

A Unique Position

At one point during the school year, Susan mentioned to me that our research conversations were like therapy. She was in a unique position, and she was thankful to talk and to try to understand the sources of her stress. She explained that there was no one else she could really talk to about her experience. Neither her former colleagues who were still in teacher leadership roles outside the school, nor her former teacher colleagues, had undergone the career transition she was living through. Susan commented,

> I'm in such a different place from everybody else. I'm missing somebody to do the journey with because that helps you to get it all out there and figure it all out. . . . there's no kindred spirit to mull over with.

Debbie indicated that she felt very much one of the teaching staff, but she also felt confident

approaching the administration, and they frequently consulted her. She said, "I probably felt

comfortable . . . because what I brought to the table was recognized, and I felt like an equal."

Debbie was in a unique position in her school (no other teacher had time in their schedule for

supporting other teachers), but she did not appear to find this role unsettling.

Discussion

It is to be expected that the experiences of two individuals, in this case, two formal

teacher leaders who returned to classroom teaching, would be different. However, these two

teacher leaders had common touch points: their roles as external teacher leaders in the area of

curriculum support, their long experience in the education system, and their voluntary decision to

return to classroom teaching. Considering the similarities, it is interesting to wonder why they

had such dissimilar experiences. Two major differences lie in (a) the definition of their teacher

leader role and (b) their familiarity with the school to which they returned.

Definition of Teacher Leader Role

The teachers' contrasting experiences may be analyzed with reference to a social

constructivist theory of role definition, linking to terms and concepts presented by Owens

(2004). Much of the ambiguity and conflict experienced by Susan may be attributed to

differences in role description, role expectations, role perceptions, and role prescription between

her and the other teachers and administration. Susan's role description (she would have described

her role as having aspects of teacher leadership) was in contrast to the role expectation of all the

other staff (they expected her to act solely as a classroom teacher). Susan's role perception (she

expected the other teachers to know about her teacher leadership experience) also did not match

that of the school staff. Finally, in terms of role prescription, Susan's notion that she would act as a teacher leader was inconsistent with the general norm for her role of classroom teacher. Schmidt (2000) explained how difficult it can be "when other people's defined expectations for the role and its purposes are at odds with one's own" (p. 830). Susan experienced that tension.

For Debbie, role description, role expectation, and role perception were congruent. She experienced some tension related to being simultaneously a teacher and a leader. This might be understood as an issue of role prescription because the usual norm in the culture of teaching is for teachers to be teachers and leaders to be leaders (Fitzgerald &Gunter, 2008; Mangin & Stoelinga, 2011). Despite this, Debbie experienced far less stress than Susan.

Swanson, Elliot, and Harmon (2011) suggested that "without official leadership positions, questions of authority and role definition create additional challenges [for teacher leaders]" (p. 44)**.** Certainly, Susan's identity, authority, power, and potential for influence were all very different from those of Debbie, and the variation in their role descriptions accounts for much of this. Debbie's clear role description could be the source of the ease she felt in relation to four of the six tensions described above: defined role, acknowledgement and recognition, opportunities—but no time—for leadership, and brief professional conversations. In contrast to Susan, Debbie had a defined teacher leader role, her school knew and drew upon her past leadership work, and she had time for leadership work and professional conversations.

With regards to Susan's other sources of tension, Debbie shared similar self-imposed expectations for exemplary practice and came to terms with them in similar ways. However, Debbie seemed unperturbed by her unique position in the school. Perhaps this was due to her previous experience with leaving her position and returning. In addition, the degree of support from her administrators for her teacher leadership activities may have been a contributing factor.

Researchers have indicated that support from administrators is crucial for teacher leaders'

success (Akert & Martin, 2012; Berg, Charner-Laird, Fiarman, Jones, Qazilbash, & Johnson,

2005; Birky, Shelton, & Headley, 2006; Gigante & Firestone, 2008; Muijs & Harris, 2003,

2007). The support mentioned is usually in terms of time and resources. For Debbie, the

administrative support was also demonstrated through approval and encouragement and this may

have had a positive emotional effect on her. Because of her defined leadership role, she may

have established a closer connection with the school's administrators, possibly diminishing her

feeling of being in a unique and somewhat lonely position in the school.

School to Which the Teacher Leaders Returned

A second significant difference between Debbie and Susan's return to classroom

teaching lies in the schools in which they taught. Susan returned to classroom teaching in a

school where she did not know the teachers or the administrators. It is predictable that Susan

would have experienced stress: "The more elements of change the newcomer faces, the more

adjustments and sensemaking is required of the individual" (Grodzki, 2011, p. 22).

In contrast, Debbie returned to teach in the very same classroom that she had left two

years previously. She had been back to the school in the interim, providing support for the new

mathematics curriculum and coaching several individual teachers. She had long-term

relationships with both the teaching and administrative staff. Her experience confirmed that

"teacher leadership seems to operate best where there are high degrees of trust. . . . Trust is most

likely to develop in schools where relationships are strong, in the sense that staff know, or think

they know, one another" (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, as cited in Muijs & Harris, 2007, p. 131). In

fact, towards the end of her year's return to teaching, Debbie commented,

20

when I look at my transition back to here, finding my space within here, I
think it has been an easy one because I knew the school culture. I think the
school saw me as a part of that culture.

Susan's final reflection, despite the various tensions she had experienced, was "I still think it was a good strategy. I didn't need to come in as a know-it-all. . . . I needed people to see me as a classroom teacher." These comments seem to indicate that the two identified differences between Debbie and Susan's return—the definition of role and their familiarity with the school to which they returned—were inextricably interwoven. Debbie more easily embraced the role of teacher leader alongside the role of classroom teacher, perhaps because she already had trusting relationships with the teachers and administrators in her school. Susan, new to the staff, strongly felt that she needed to develop relationships and trust with the teachers before she could begin a teacher leadership role.

Neither Debbie nor Susan wanted to be seen as an expert. This may be a response by women aware of the success and likeability divide (Sandberg, 2013). The gendered nature of this reluctance has not previously been identified in the literature about teacher leaders. Rather the explanation for this behaviour has been linked to teacher leaders' awareness of the traditional school norm of egalitarianism (Crowther et al., 2009; Lieberman & Friedrich, 2007; Mangin & Stoelinga, 2011). Mangin (2005) noted that,

ironically, the teacher leader's reluctance to cast herself as an expert can
undermine others' perceptions of her ability to serve as a resource. If teachers
view the teacher leader as lacking expert knowledge, there is little incentive to
seek the teacher leader's advice or guidance. (p. 470)

Certainly, Muijs and Harris's (2007) contention that "for teacher leadership to be successful it has to be a carefully orchestrated and deliberate process" (p. 129) seems to be applicable for both Debbie and Susan.

Conclusion

Is there value in reading the stories of returning teacher leaders such as Susan and Debbie? Eisnor (1991) has asserted that "research is the creation of resources that others can use to think about the situations in which they are interested" (p. 210). It is my hope that the stories of Susan's and Debbie's transitions will provoke thought among district personnel who make decisions about teacher leader placement in classroom positions, administrators who receive teacher leaders into their school, and teacher leaders themselves, as they return to work with children. Those various stakeholders might think about how to increase mutual awareness of the teacher leader's former professional work and how the return to a school-based position might be more intentional while still respecting the individual's potential need for acculturation. Overall, key players might consider the experiences of Susan and Debbie and plan together to ensure that a return to classroom teaching feels less like a slide down a snake, and more like a move up a ladder.

The increased recognition that "most professional development experiences fail to affect what teachers do in the classroom every day" (Grimm, Kaufman, & Doty, 2014, p. 24) has resulted in widespread recommendations for teachers to learn with and from other teachers in the context of their school (Gulamhussein, 2013; Guskey, 2014). The review of current literature, above, suggested that teacher leaders returning to the classroom have the potential to contribute to school improvement. These professionals have current curricular and instructional knowledge and they have experience in supporting the learning of other teachers. To date, little research has been focused on the phenomenon of formal teacher leaders returning to classroom teaching. The few studies that have been completed indicate that this career transition is very complex. Further research into this topic would be helpful in order to understand how to optimize the potential of

these teacher leaders in student and school improvement. It would be interesting to find out if knowing in advance about the possible sources of stress would have a positive impact on the returning teacher's experience. It would also be informative to explore the points of view of school administrators who receive these teachers into their schools and of other teachers who work alongside them. Such studies would contribute to our understanding of how to optimize the resource represented by formal teacher leaders who return to classroom teaching.

References

Akert, N., & Martin, B. N. (2012). The role of teacher leaders in school improvement through the perceptions of principals and teachers. *International Journal of Education*, *4*, 284–299.

Angelle, P. S., & Schmid, J. B. (2007). School structure and the identity of teacher leaders: Perspectives of principals and teachers. *Journal of School Leadership*, *17*, 771–799.

Barnett, B. (2013). Teacherpreneurs: A bold brand of teacher leadership for 21st-century teaching and learning. *Science*, *340*(6130), 309–310

Berg, J. H., Charner-Laird, M., Fiarman, S. E., Jones, A., Qazilbash, E. K., & Johnson, S. M. (2005, April). *Cracking the mold: How second-stage teachers experience their differentiated roles*. Paper presented at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Canada.

Berry, B., Daughtrey, A., & Wieder, A. (2010). *Teacher leadership: Leading the way to effective teaching and learning*. Chapel Hill, NC: Center for Teaching Quality. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED509719)

Birky, V. D., Shelton, M., & Headley, S. (2006). An administrator's challenge: Encouraging teachers to be leaders. *National Association of Secondary Schools Bulletin*, *90*(2), 87–101.

Busher, H., Hammersley-Fletcher, L., & Turner, C. (2007). Making sense of middle leadership: Community, power and practice. *School Leadership and Management*, *27*, 405–422.

Crafton, L., & Kaiser, E. (2011). The language of collaboration: Dialogue and identity in teacher professional development. *Improving Schools*, *14*, 104–116.

Crowther, F., Ferguson, M, & Hann, L. (2009). *Developing teacher leaders: How teacher leadership enhances school success* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Donaldson, M. L., Johnson, S. M., Kirkpatrick, C., Marinell, W., Steele, J., & Szczesiul, S. (2008). Angling for access, bartering for change: How second-stage teachers experience differentiated roles in schools. *Teachers College Record*, *110*, 1088–1114.

Eisnor, E. (1991). *The enlightened eye: Qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of educational practice*. New York: MacMillan.

Fiarman, S. (2007, April). *It's hard to go back: Career decisions of second-stage teacher leaders*. Paper presented at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago.

Fitzgerald, T., & Gunter, H. M. (2008). Contesting the orthodoxy of teacher leadership. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, *11*, 331–340.

Gigante, N. A., & Firestone, W. A. (2008). Administrative support and teacher leadership in schools implementing reform. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *46*, 302–331.

Grimm, E. D., Kaufman, T., & Doty, D. (2014). Rethinking classroom observation. *Educational Leadership*, *71*(8), 24–29.

Grodzki, J. (2011). Role identity: At the intersection of organizational socialization and individual sensemaking of new principals and vice-principals. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, *127*, 1–47.

Grogan, M., & Shakeshaft, C. (2013). A new way: Diverse collective leadership. In M. Grogan (Ed.), *The Jossey-Bass reader on educational leadership* (3rd ed., pp. 111–130). San Francisco: John Wiley and Sons.

Gulamhussein, A. (2013). *Teaching the teachers: Effective Professional development in an era of high stakes accountability*. Retrieved from the Center for Public Education website: http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Staffingstudents/Teaching-the-Teachers-Effective-Professional-Development-in-an-Era-of-High-Stakes-Accountability

Guskey, T. (2014). Planning professional learning. *Educational Leadership*, *71*(8), 11–16.

Harrison, C., & Killion, J. (2007). Ten roles for teacher leaders. *Educational Leadership*, *65*, 74–77.

Joyce, B., & Calhoun, E. (2010). *Models of professional development: A celebration of educators*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Lieberman, A., & Miller, L. (2004). *Teacher leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Lieberman, A., & Friedrich, L. (2007). Teachers, writers, leaders. *Educational Leadership*, *65*, 42–47.

Lynch, J., & Ferguson, K. (2010). Reflections of elementary school literacy coaches on practice: Roles and perspectives. *Canadian Journal of Education*, *33*, 199–227.

Mangin, M. M. (2005). Distributed leadership and the culture of schools: Teacher leaders' strategies for gaining access to classrooms. *Journal of School Leadership*, *15*, 456–484.

Mangin, M., & Stoelinga, S. (2011). Peer? Expert? Teacher leaders struggle to gain trust while establishing their expertise. *Journal of Staff Development*, *32*(3), 48–51.

Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Muijs, D., & Harris, A. (2003). Teacher leadership—Improvement through empowerment? An overview of the literature. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, *31*, 437–448.

Muijs, D., & Harris, A. (2006). Teacher led school improvement: Teacher leadership in the UK. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *22*, 961–972.

Muijs, D., & Harris, A. (2007). Teacher leadership in (in)action: Three case studies of contrasting schools. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, *35*, 111–134.

Munroe, E. (2010). *A study of a teacher leader going back to the classroom*. Retrieved from Rocky View Schools website: http://www.rockyview.ab.ca/home/professional-learning/research/research_committee

Munroe, E. (in press). Unanticipated tensions in returning to classroom teaching: One returning teacher leader's experience. *Journal of Educational Administration and Foundations*.

Murphy, J. (2005). *Connecting teacher leadership and school improvement*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Nelson, T. H., Deuel, A., Slavit, D., & Kennedy, A. (2010). Leading deep conversations in collaborative inquiry groups. *Clearing House*, *83*, 175–179.

Owens, G. R. (2004). *Organizational behavior in education*: *Adaptive leadership and school reform* (8th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Sandberg, S. (2013). *Lean in: Women, work, and the will to lead*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Schmoker, M. (2005). No turning back: The ironclad case for professional learning communities. In R. DuFour, R. Eaker, & R. DuFour (Eds.), *On common ground: The power of professional learning communities* (pp. 135–154). Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

Schmidt, M. (2000). Role theory, emotions, and identity in the department headship of secondary schooling. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *16*, 827–842.

Stake, R. (2003). Case studies. In Denzin, N.K., & Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds.), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry* (2nd ed., pp. 134–164). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Smylie, M. A. (1999). Teacher stress in a time of reform. In R. Vandenberghe & A. M. Huberman (Eds.), *Understanding and preventing teacher burnout: A sourcebook of international research and practice* (pp. 59–85). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Steinbacher-Reed, C., & Powers, E. (2011). Coaching without a coach. *Educational Leadership*, *69*(4), 68–72.

Swanson, J., Elliott, K., & Harmon, J. (2011). *Teacher leader stories: The power of case methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Taylor, M., Goeke, J., Klein, E., Onore, C., & Geist, K. (2011). Changing leadership: Teachers lead the way for schools that learn. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *27*, 920–929.

Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium. (n.d.). *Teacher leader model standards*. Retrieved from http://www.ets.org/s/education_topics/teaching_quality/pdf/ teacher_leader_model_standards.pdf

Wood, C., & Meyer, M. J. (2011). Impact of the Nova Scotia accreditation program on teaching and student learning: An initial study. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, *124*, 1–33.

York-Barr, J., & Duke, K. (2004). What do we know about teacher leadership? Findings from two decades of scholarship. *Review of Educational Research*, *74*, 255–316.