"We've Been Forgotten": First-hand Perspectives on Teacher Leaders and Teacher Leadership in Urban Schools

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Abstract

The use of teacher leadership in PK-12 education has experienced a resurgence since the late 1990's as school leadership models have evolved to include the engagement of diverse stakeholders in school and district leadership processes aimed at positive change and improvement efforts. Despite the recent evolution of school leadership, there remain several barriers to understanding the nature of the work that teacher leaders engage in and the contributions that they make to improvement efforts. This grounded theory study examined teacher perceptions of teacher leadership, the types of work teacher leaders should engage in and the boundaries of that work, and barriers to teacher leadership. Using interview data from 22 teachers in a large urban school district, we found that teachers function in many domains of work and are eager for pathways to leverage their expertise. We conclude by discussing the implications from our findings to district- and school-level leaders.

Keywords: PK-12 education, school improvement, teacher leadership

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Globally, school systems are regularly engaging teachers in a variety of leadership models with a focus on change and improvement efforts (Smylie & Eckert 2018; Weiner & Woulfin 2018). Thus, the use of teacher leadership in PK-12 education has experienced a resurgence since the late 1990s as leadership models have increasingly called for engagement of diverse stakeholders in school and district leadership processes (Silva et al., 2000). However, there remain several barriers to understanding the nature of the work that teacher leaders engage in and the contributions that they make to improvement efforts (Muijs & Harris, 2006; Wenner & Campbell, 2017); these barriers include the contextual nature of teacher leadership and the nuanced ways in which teacher leaders work both within and across parts of school and district organizations (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). This proposal seeks to address these gaps in our understanding of teacher leadership through a mixed methods study that prioritizes teachers' voices in examining the following overarching question: What are teachers' perceptions of the purpose of teacher leadership, the types of work that teacher leaders should engage in and the boundaries of that work, and the barriers to teacher leadership?

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Teacher leadership has remained hard to define given the contextual ways in which teacher leadership is implemented and the continuous evolution of teacher leadership (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Three waves of evolution have been described: the first wave of teacher leadership in the 1980s saw experienced teachers serving in management roles such as department chairs and union representatives to improve efficiency. The second wave saw teacher leaders utilized for their instructional expertise, serving in mentoring, curriculum development, and professional development roles. The third, current wave of teacher leadership is concerned with teacher leaders engaging in a wide array of organizational change levers and emerged concurrently with models of distributed leadership, transformational leadership, and leadership for organizational change (e.g., Fullan, 1994; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Silva et al., 2000).

While teacher leadership has been practiced as a way of professionalizing teaching and drawing on teacher instructional expertise for more than three decades, emphasis on the value of teacher leaders as important players in "collective, task-oriented, and organizational approaches" has increased (Ingersoll et al., 2018; Smylie et al., 2002). However, a recent, large-scale study of teacher leadership in the United States revealed that teacher influence over domains of schooling outside of instruction, such as discipline, teacher hiring, professional development, and school improvement still remains low, particularly in schools and districts serving communities experiencing high rates of poverty (Ingersoll et al., 2018). The current finding that teacher leadership remains inconsistently leveraged across the work domains of schooling is problematic given that these domains of work must work in concert with each other for consistent organizational improvement (Bryk et al., 2010).

Methodology

This study seeks to examine the concepts of teacher leadership and school improvement concurrently to determine if and how teacher leadership can be leveraged to contribute a unique value to improvement efforts. To realize this purpose, we use a convergent mixed-methods study

design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) gathering qualitative data from interviews and artifacts and quantitative data from a survey. This approach permits "methodological triangulation" (Morse, 1991, p. 120), which leverages different types of methods to enhance the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data, as well as increase the trustworthiness of findings.

This study is situated in Kenmore School District (KSD), a self-described "large-city district" in a U.S. Midwestern state, that enrolls approximately 33,000 students across 65 schools. In 2016, KSD created a new four-year strategic plan, and one plank centered on expanding the role of teacher leaders in schools. Given the lack of literature on the topic, we capitalized on the opportunity to learn more from KSD teachers based on an action research partnership KSD developed with a local university. Our sample consisted of approximately 125 KSD employees classified as "teachers," which included a range of roles from classroom teacher or intervention specialist to grade level leader or school psychologist.

Data collection. Based on a review of literature and resources from state educational agencies and technical assistance centers regarding teacher leadership and school decision-making, we created a survey instrument with 44 Likert-type items spanning six topics of interest: instructional leadership, administrative leadership, teacher leadership functions, collaborative climate, data-driven decision-making, and community engagement. We administered the survey to a random sample of 25% of KSD's instructional staff. To enrich interpretations of survey results (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009), we are also conducting semi-structured interviews with survey respondents who were willing to offer more information in these topic areas. To date, we have interviewed 18 teachers and are continuing interviews throughout summer 2020.

Data analysis. We first examined descriptive statistics from the survey. We also performed exploratory factor analysis to test factorial structures and validity. For the interviews and artifacts, we intentionally desired to preserve as much participant voice as possible, therefore we engaged in a grounded theory approach by using an open coding scheme and the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The research team first analyzed two interview transcripts and met to discuss coding and themes to help guide future analyses (Charmaz, 2006). As we conduct additional interviews, research team members continue to collaborate to refine codes, eliminate redundancies, collapse open codes into axial codes via the data reduction process, and devise evidentiary assertions based on the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Findings

This paper extends previous teacher leadership scholarship by prioritizing the voice of teacher leaders as they define the scope and purpose of their work and the possibilities for untapped teacher leadership opportunities within the KSD. For the sake of brevity and this proposal's purpose, we foreground findings from our qualitative data (below) and related survey data (see Appendix A), specifically three key themes related to teacher leadership:

Theme 1 – Teacher leaders function across nearly all domains of work within schools, engaging in diverse types of work (see Appendix A). They extend and sometimes replace the efforts of administrators in supporting instruction within schools. For example, participants voiced that few boundaries should constrain the opportunity to engage in site-based leadership and collaborative decision-making with one notable exception: evaluative or supervisory leadership of individual teachers. Participants voiced that teachers in *formal* and *informal* leadership capacities are particularly well positioned to engage in significant instructional leadership efforts including service on the instructional leadership team to align decisions and initiatives with "things that matter in the classroom" and providing professional

development on key priority topics such as culturally relevant curriculum and social and emotional learning, and providing job-embedded supports for new teachers.

Theme 2 – Teacher leaders' work is unique given their position on the "front lines" and ability to span boundaries. In addition to acting as a bridge between district and school policies and individual classrooms, teacher leaders serve as a bridge to the community at large. Often, teachers, especially veteran teachers, have long standing relationships with the local community, and teacher leaders are uniquely positioned to bring the local community into schools and to represent their schools in the community. It is this knowledge of the community and school that informs teacher leaders' deep understanding of the challenges impacting achievement, the needs and priorities of students and their families, and the potential for meaningful community partnerships. Further, their rich contextual knowledge allows teachers to take on meaningful "passion projects" that address targeted needs (e.g., development of mentor/resident teacher programs, fostering community partnerships). Finally, teacher leaders can leverage their local knowledge to support colleagues in the use of data in instructional decision-making. These specific functions impact teaching and learning direction setting.

Theme 3 – Teacher leaders are eager for pathways and supports that remove barriers in order to leverage their work as teachers. In particular, participants voiced two key frustrations. First, little time and opportunity can be devoted to teacher leadership activities given outside influences. As a result, a teacher taking on formal and informal roles is required to "volunteer" their time to engage in the work. Additionally, limited opportunities exist for teachers who are eager to engage in leadership work but have no interest in the principalship, and current formalized opportunities present notable drawbacks. For example, teachers on special assignment can only work in that role for three years before they must return to the classroom.

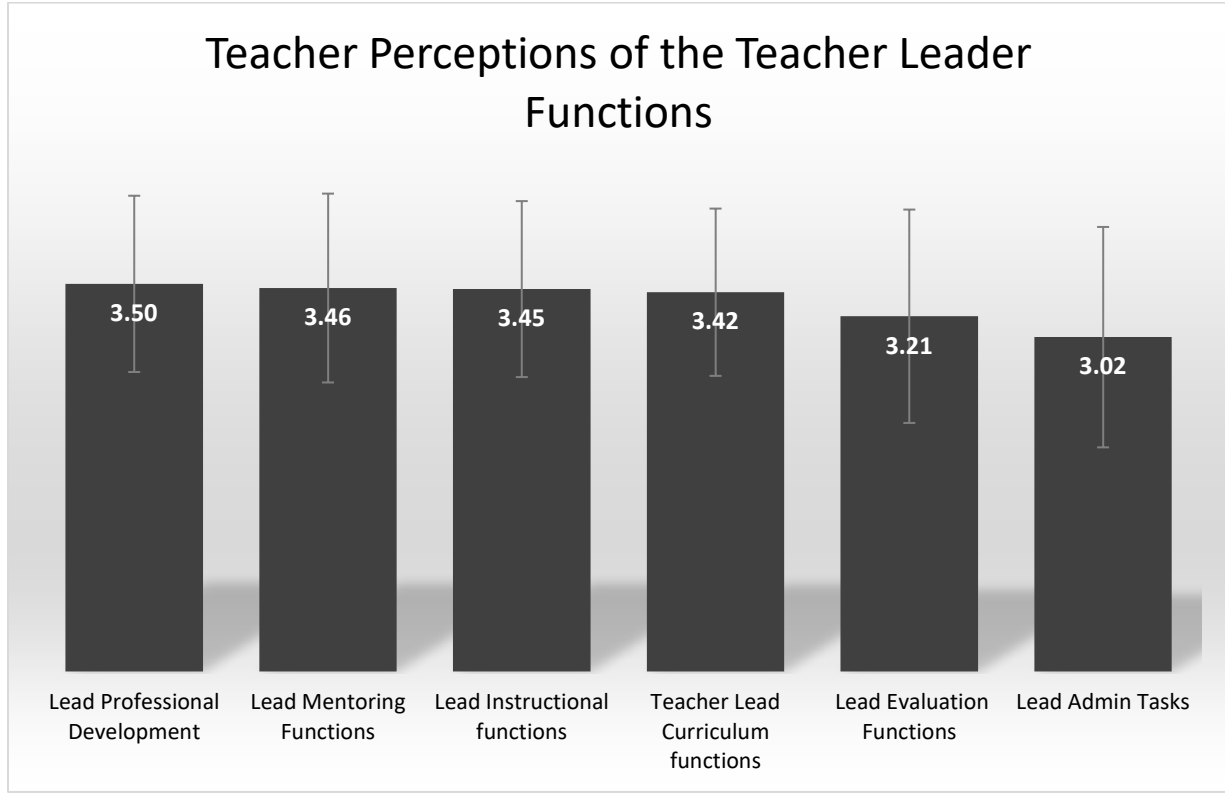**Significance and Application to 2020 UCEA Convention Theme**

This study offers implications for the field of teacher leadership and for districts seeking to invest in teacher leadership pathways and more authentic school improvement efforts. The findings provide a crystallization of the role teacher leaders play in their schools, as defined by teachers and teacher leaders. In addition, the findings provide a clear call by teacher leaders for support and recognition of their work and by teachers who are interested in teacher leadership opportunities but feel constrained from pursuing these opportunities without the time or compensation structures that empower this level of professional engagement. Finally, the findings extend the work of Acker-Hocevar and Touchton (1999) to demonstrate the unique position teacher leaders have to serve as boundary spanners between schools and the community.

The convention call for proposals asks us to "highlight critical discourses around knowledge production and the control of knowledge," and the findings of this study reframe the role of teacher leadership. Rather than sharing or distributing duties with teacher leaders, administrators can partner with teacher leaders by empowering them to engage in innovative work that this year's UCEA theme encourages us to support by inviting us to "consider how we might best belong together in meaningful and replenishing ways as we critically examine and re/build our academic, institutional, and personal homes." Such belonging calls for deconstructing the narratives that perpetuate hierarchies in favor of collaborative, dynamic instructional leadership opportunities that support students and communities.

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Teacher Perceptions of the Teacher Leader Functions

3.50	3.46	3.45	3.42	3.21	3.02
Lead Professional Development	Lead Mentoring Functions	Lead Instructional functions	Teacher Lead Curriculum functions	Lead Evaluation Functions	Lead Admin Tasks

Figure 1. Teacher Perceptions of the Types of Work Teacher Leaders Should Lead or Be Engaged In. Mean responses of teachers to the question, "To what extent to you agree that your school would benefit from a teacher leader taking the lead in each area?" Responses are measured on a Likert-type scale where 1 = Disagree; 4 = Agree. Error bars are standard deviations.