

Voices From the Field: Teachers' Perceptions of Who Teacher Leaders are and What They do

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Abstract: Teacher leadership is important for providing high-quality education. However, there is little consensus on what constitutes teacher leadership. We explored perceptions of eight teachers about teacher leadership. The following themes emerged to describe teacher leaders: being a model, lifetime learner, experienced teacher, listener, aware of everyone's needs, communicator, and collaborator as well as assisting teachers and improving students' learning. Those who participated in a teacher leadership program were engaged in professional development beyond school-level.

Introduction

Providing teacher leadership opportunities may be a potential solution to support building knowledge and sustaining a community of highly qualified teachers. To conduct rigorous research on the impacts of teacher leadership opportunities, many scholars attempted to describe teacher leadership and what teacher leaders do. However, many studies still failed to provide an encompassing definition of teacher leadership (Nguyen et al., 2019; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). The conceptualization of what constitutes teacher leadership is widely varied across literature (Neumerski, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2019). Broadly, some definitions of teacher leadership include going beyond classroom walls by "maintaining K-12 classroom-based teaching responsibilities, while also taking leadership responsibilities outside of classroom" (Wenner & Campbell, 2017, p. 140). However, these definitions mainly represent the perspectives of researchers that are external to the practice. Therefore, it is important to explore the teachers' perceptions regarding teacher leadership. Such exploration can advance the current teacher leadership frameworks and models (e.g., Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, 2011) by bringing in the practice side of the coin and bridging research and practice. Handful of studies investigated how teachers' perceptions of teacher leadership (e.g., obtained through teacher leadership inventory survey; Angelle & Teague, 2014) relates to other factors such as self-efficacy, age, gender, educational qualifications, and teaching experience (Aliakbari & Sadeghi, 2014; Angelle & Teague, 2014) or the schools' culture and context (Bradley-Levine et al., 2014). These studies are limited by self-reported surveys of teacher perceptions and do not necessarily focus on defining teacher leadership. In this paper, through in-depth interviews, we aim to explore how master teacher fellows (MTFs) described the characteristics of teacher leaders and what teacher leaders do in comparison to non-MTFs. The following research questions framed our work: How do teachers perceive teacher leadership (characteristics and what do teacher leaders do)? Do perceptions of MTFs and non-MTFs differ in this regard?

Methods

We conducted one hour-long semi-structured Zoom interviews with eight mathematics teachers (three male, five female; six White, one biracial, one African American) with 10 to 25 years of teaching. In this paper, we focused on the following interview questions "What do you think the characteristics of a teacher leader are? What do you think teacher leaders do?" We used deductive, thematic data analysis (Saldaña, 2021) and drew from York-Barr and Duke's (2004) review summary.

Results

There were no noticeable differences between MTFs' and non-MTFs' descriptions of teacher leader characteristics. We found four common themes: being a (a) model, (b) lifetime learner, and experienced teacher, (c) listener and aware of everyone's needs, and (d) communicator and collaborator. Both non-MTFs and MTFs indicated that being a model for teachers and students is one of the teacher leaders' characteristics. For instance, a non-MTF, said, "A leader also sets the example by continuing to learn and change and to teach other people what to do." An MTF thought "they [teacher leaders] set an example for other teachers" and "model what they should be doing." To become a model for other teachers and students, teacher leaders need to also continue to learn and develop their knowledge of teaching and learning. Both MTFs and non-MTFs highlighted the importance of "continu[ing] to learn and change," "grow[ing] from what I was learning," and "learn[ing] from each other...grow[ing] together." An experienced and knowledgeable teacher can offer "suggestions on how to better fit into the faculty climate," provide "content-focused coaching," or "share ideas" about teaching and

learning as well as understand and make use of students' assessment data. MTFs and non-MTFs described that teacher leaders need to listen and become aware of everyone's needs. It is only by being a good listener, a teacher leader can "understand what is needed and assist newer people in achieving certain levels." As a teacher leader, a non-MTF, said, "I need to listen to other people...to my students when they tell me things. I need to listen to other teachers when they tell me about the problems and the struggles that they are having." Being a good listener is one step toward being an effective communicator and collaborator. The communication skills and ability to collaborate were other characteristics of teacher leaders. For example, an MTF explained, "being able to communicate with a teacher without them feeling like they're inadequate, or they don't know what they do...always trying to be positive with them and just trying to build them up..."

The teachers describe the characteristics of a teacher leader in relation to their leadership responsibilities. These responsibilities illuminated what teacher leaders do or are expected to do, which were centered around different approaches to assisting teachers and improving students' learning. For example, an MTF said, "I think a teacher leader is someone who, you know, who assists teachers, works collaboratively with teachers to better craft their teaching, you know, through content-focused coaching." MTFs more often thought of these leadership responsibilities in a broader range and were more engaged in their school and district PD programs compared to non-MTFs. For example, an MTF took part in designing questions "for the high school level, national level."

Significance, contribution, implication

In this paper, we found four common themes highlighting the characteristics of teacher leaders: significant experience and extensive knowledge, lifelong learning, and communication and collaboration skills (in line with prior studies; e.g., Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Further, teachers described what teacher leaders do by primarily focusing on what York-Barr and Duke (2004) referred to as the professional development of colleagues. However, in comparison with non-MTFs, the MTFs' engagement in leadership activities were beyond their schools. The implication of this study is particularly important for those who plan and support teacher leadership programs. The results of this paper contribute to the conceptualization of what constitutes teacher leadership from teachers' perspectives and provide practitioner insights into models and frameworks for teacher leadership.

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