Chapter 14
Teacher Leaders: Cautions and Questions

Charles F. Webber

Abstract The value of teacher leadership is logical and intuitive. It is a central element of constructs such as school improvement, school effectiveness, and professional learning communities. The connection between teacher leadership and student achievement has not been documented convincingly by empirical data. Indeed, the very definition of teacher leadership remains vague and contested. Nonetheless, a commonly accepted description of teacher leadership as the influence of classroom-based teachers on improving teaching and learning may be enough to warrant ongoing attention.

These uncertainties must not suggest that attempts to learn more about teacher leadership should be abandoned. Rather, educators with experience in formal school-based leadership positions know that some classroom-based teachers influence members of the school community much more than others do. Some teachers' influence is positive, while some teachers' influence is more neutral or even toxic. Therefore, it is important that researchers and professional developers continue to learn more about the attributes of teacher leaders who contribute to school improvement, even in the face of significant challenges. It is equally important that support for teacher leaders align with the unique attributes of their school communities.

Finally, studies of several teacher leadership topics have the potential to further guide teacher educators, professional developers, and formal leaders. Examples of those topics include teacher advocacy for students, risk-taking behaviors, the value of formal academic credentials, and the motives guiding teacher leaders.

Keywords Teacher leadership · Cultural context · Teacher influence · Leadership attributes

The ISTL has not derived a definition of teacher leadership that has clear parameters and lends itself to cause–effect analyses. The most common description of teacher

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leadership as the influence wielded by classroom-based teachers in the interest of improving teaching and learning in their school communities may be enough of a definition.

Schools and school systems are ecosystems, with some principals and teachers who stand out more than others because of their wide acceptance as credible, trustworthy individuals to whom community members are willing to entrust the education of their children. These are the principals with whom many teachers wish to work because they facilitate a generative space for others to lead and influence. The teachers are those who parents strive to have instruct their children. They are the ones to whom other teachers turn to for advice and professional learning. It is true that most teachers have the potential to become such influential informal and formal leaders but not all will.

The ISTL research team has shared in this book its observations about the importance of teacher leadership and the influence of teacher leaders in the complex teaching and learning environments where they work. The researchers have cautioned that teacher leaders share common attributes, but their leadership is enacted differently within the cultural and organizational contexts of their schools and communities. The ability of teacher leaders to contribute to school improvement initiatives, even in conditions with daunting challenges, causes others to value their capacity to focus on possibilities and to lead.

Teacher leaders across cultures are guided by elevated levels of altruism and deep commitments to their students and school communities. Their actions demonstrate their willingness to include colleagues and parents in decision-making and curricular innovations. They accept that learners and their communities require unique approaches to what and how students learn. They attract the trust of their colleagues and of formal school leaders. Their altruistic approach separates teacher leaders from their colleagues, whose motivations may be less magnanimous.

Teachers who gravitate to the role of teacher leader are likely to cultivate the creative and entrepreneurial dimensions of their profession. They accommodate change by seeing opportunities to collaborate with principals and other teachers to generate spaces that celebrate diversity and facilitate equity. They reflect and exercise professional judgment and are characterized as innovators rather than resisters.

An important attribute of teacher leaders that emerged during the ISTL is a strong self-awareness that facilitated meaningful reflection about their work. Their high degree of autonomy allowed them to be less vulnerable to the forces of socialization that can impede creative teaching and thoughtful problem-solving. It is possible that teacher leaders' autonomous natures and capacity for thoughtful reflection constitute a form of self-care.

Interestingly, although consideration of a *tall poppy syndrome* is a risk factor for teachers, conflict management skills did not surface as a significant component of teacher leaders' skill sets. This may be due in part to the informal and nonthreatening style of leading allowed to teacher leaders who are not charged with fulfilling the formal responsibilities carried by principals. A corollary of the minimal appearance of conflict management in the international study of teacher leadership is the observation that teacher leader advocacy is directed toward the educational welfare

of students and not politicized advocacy directed toward formal leaders and policymakers.

What did emerge across cultural settings was a clear understanding that continuous professional learning is part of being a teacher leader. The learning was primarily self-directed and often appeared as informal learning with peers in the context of improving teaching and learning. The social acumen of teacher leaders led to their connectedness to other members of their school communities and to participation in large community and professional networks. Teacher leaders were described as adroit at garnering mentorship from colleagues and, concurrently, serving as mentors to peers at all career stages. Most important, teacher leaders were characterized by the ability to see opportunities for professional learning and to participate in school-wide instructional improvement. They had the ability to plan effectively their teaching and professional learning and then to act on their plans.

Members of the ISTL collectively have completed several of the six stages of the original research design. Much of that work is shared in this book and elsewhere as journal articles. Case study reports are forthcoming. Several informative oral histories have been conducted with mid- and late-career teachers, plus retired teachers, all of whom are seen as leaders by other teachers. Some are influential because of the wide impact of their work in their school communities, a few see themselves as voices of advocacy for teachers who represent racial and cultural diversity, and the impacts of other teacher leaders have spread nationally and internationally.

Emerging from the ISTL, several teacher leadership topics merit further research. They include the following:

- An exploration of how some teacher leaders who participated in the ISTL describe themselves as *advocates* for their students while others say they are *activists*. Is there a difference between advocacy and activism and, if so, what are the repercussions of each?
- Teacher leaders are described at various points in this book as risk takers. What are the anticipated and unanticipated outcomes of risk-taking behavior?
- It was observed in this study that teacher leaders seek to improve teaching and learning, which, in turn, is influenced by principals, system leaders, parents, and community members. What happens to teacher leadership and school improvement initiatives when principals and system leaders change? How do influential parents change the dynamics of leadership in schools?
- Regarding how teachers learn to lead, are there differential impacts from informal and formal learning experiences? Do additional academic credentials influence how or if teachers lead in their school communities?
- If improving student learning is the aim of teacher leadership, then how do students perceive the influence of teachers reputed to be leaders?
- In the previous chapter, the argument was made that, to be classroom-based leaders, teachers must have altruistic motives. What of those whose motivations are less noble? Some teachers manage to contribute to unprofessional school cultures where bullying of teachers or principals is tolerated and even encouraged.

What makes some teachers toxic leaders and how can their impact be
ameliorated?

- If teachers begin to develop their professional identity early in their preservice
  teacher education programs, then how should the leadership functions of their
  future roles in school be facilitated?
- Finally, is teacher leadership even the best descriptor of how teachers influence
  their learning communities? Is teacher leadership in fact just teachers doing what
  they ought to do?

It is clear from the literature relating to teacher leadership, school improvement,
and school effectiveness that a cohesive school community with a positive mission
and clear learning goals is desirable. Adding to the research literature in these areas,
as the ISTL research team is doing, will inform teacher educators, principal prepa-
ration programs, professional developers, and policymakers.

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