

Teacher leader and teacher leadership: A call for conceptual clarity



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Abstract

Education systems cannot afford to lose promising teachers who could be the school leaders of tomorrow. My work shows a need to promote leadership as learning for teachers and students rather than as management and administration involving heavy workloads and disconnectedness from students and their learning.

Conceptions of leadership that allow teachers to see professional learning as the reason for their work make a contribution to school leadership as a whole. Schools benefit from leaders at all levels, no matter their distance from classrooms. School cultures can stimulate leadership practices when professional learning exchanges among teachers are reciprocated. Professional learning is dependent on school leaders making the time and space available to support and encourage teacher leadership as an attractive option for teachers. This paper highlights an example of a reflective tool (heuristic) for its potential value in reflecting on the content knowledge needed by leadership aspirants making the transition to leadership-for-learning work.

This paper draws upon the longitudinal Teachers of Promise study of New Zealand teachers' conceptions of leadership work as well as experiences and insights into why it matters for the profession and individuals to ensure teacher leadership is valued and possible. We need more conceptual clarity on who counts as a leader; the scope of leadership work; and how it can be supported to capture those with potential to influence the work of colleagues as well as student learners.

Introduction

What shapes early-career teachers' conceptions of leadership is a matter that warrants closer attention. Assumptions are made that talented teachers will be tomorrow's school leaders.

However, the continuing high levels of attrition among early-career teachers cast doubt on this assumption, a matter recognised across several research studies (Bullough & Baughman, 1997; Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005; Johnson & The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, 2004). Recognition of high attrition rates has prompted widespread international concern about countries having sufficient numbers of new leaders ready to replace the current baby boomers reaching retirement age. To date, many countries have responded by increasing their offerings of national programs (typically targeting middle leaders, aspiring and first-time principals) in order to develop the dispositions, knowledge and skills deemed necessary for a leadership role. I argue that national provisions are only one strategy to address a much larger issue relating to conceptions of leaders and leadership, because what is currently practised as leadership is not necessarily what will appeal to the next generation of teachers as they make decisions about whether to lead or not. My interest in this dilemma has been prompted by my involvement in a longitudinal research study, Teachers of Promise (for a fuller account of the project and its subsequent publications, see New Zealand Council for Educational Research [NZCER], n.d.).

The research focus

The Teachers of Promise study was instigated by NZCER in 2004. It has traced the early careers of 57 primary and secondary teachers, from their choice of teaching as a career through experiences of initial teacher education; induction into the profession; and expansion of roles and responsibilities, including experiences of formal and informal leadership. This study provides valuable information about teachers' decisions regarding the work contexts and conditions that best satisfy their professional needs and aspirations (some of which relate to becoming positional leaders) and their reasons for choosing to stay, change school or opt out of teaching altogether. The teachers were selected from six teacher education providers, who were asked to supply a list of their most promising graduating students from the 2003 year. Our definition of a 'most promising graduating student' was someone the profession could not afford to lose and who would make a great contribution to students and their learning. We compared the providers' recommendations with the principals of the schools in which the graduating teachers were employed. All but three recommendations for these beginning teachers were

endorsed. When we began our study, these teachers had just entered their third year—a time when they had reached full registration status. We hoped that our study would identify the factors important for sustaining an interest in teaching and explain why some early-career teachers become dissatisfied and leave. Knowledge of these factors is useful when considering what actions are needed to make leadership a more attractive option and grow the pool of prospective leaders.

Data collection

Data collection for this study included four rounds of survey and individual interviews carried out in 2005, 2006, 2008 and 2011, resulting in a detailed picture of how early-career teachers view their current work and next career steps. This study was deliberately restricted to the voices of early-career teachers. There were no observations of classroom teaching or interviews with mentors or colleagues. Of particular interest were the teachers' explanations of their sources of satisfaction, challenge, support, turning points, dreams and aspirations, and frustrations (Cameron, Baker, & Lovett, 2006). Insights from each of these topics sparked my curiosity about transitions and preparation for extended roles, referred to here as 'teacher leadership'—specifically, what works for these transitions and why.

In 2016–17, I gained permission from NZCER to approach five of the teachers from the Teachers of Promise study for a further interview, outside the original project, to explore their transitions into and experiences of leadership. I began by using the terms 'teacher leader' and 'teacher leadership'. This was an attempt to signal and capture my interpretation that early forays into leadership work take varied forms. Leadership is not limited to formal titles and roles—such as middle or senior leader and head of department or faculty. It also includes instances where teachers take up opportunities to make sense of and plan improvements to their practice by drawing on their own and others' expertise.

Interestingly, my intention to explore these early leadership experiences was hindered the fact that the terms 'teacher leader' and 'teacher leadership' were not in common usage, so their meaning was unclear to the teachers interviewed. For this reason, I sought firstly to establish why these terms from the leadership literature were not readily understood in practice, and secondly to offer a process that would increase clarity about these terms.

Knowledge sourced from early-career teachers themselves would, I hoped, provide a starting point for addressing the matter of having a sufficient number of teachers interested in and ready to take on future leadership roles.

I framed my interview questions around themes I had encountered in my reading of the teacher leadership literature that called for an awakening of teachers as leaders (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Petersen, 2016).

I noted that despite the passage of time since this literature began, a call was still being made for teacher leadership based on the view that leadership need not be restricted to a formal role. I asked the teachers what they thought of teacher leadership as a named leadership theory and whether it actually existed in practice. We then explored the matter of the constraints placed on teacher leadership by its terminology, and the teachers offered their explanations as to why teacher leadership had not progressed as a named leadership theory. From there, we moved to talking about leadership as a process of influence rather than a positional role or authority over others. I also wanted to know what had prompted each of the teachers to engage in leadership work and their continuing motivations to lead. Other questions explored what the teachers thought was distinctive about teacher leadership; how it developed; how it contributed to schoolwide reform; and the extent to which teacher leadership was a preparation for positional roles.

Insights gained

A more detailed account of the teachers' responses to these interview questions is provided in Lovett (in press). For the purpose of this paper, I will summarise the key learnings about the concepts of teacher leader and teacher leadership. Teacher interviewees are referred to by the pseudonyms 'Steven', 'Robyn' and 'Ruby'.

The scope of teacher leadership was accepted as being somewhat broad but usually informal. This broadness indicated the importance of teacher initiative in leadership work through the sharing of influence and expertise, deemed by Steven to be liberating yet also hard to specify. This view was similarly endorsed by Robyn, who commented that 'teachers are leaders every day in their classrooms, mentoring others, sharing curriculum expertise and taking on projects in their departments or in the community'. Her view makes me wonder if the term, 'teacher leader' is redundant, given that every teacher could be considered a leader by default. Similarly, according to Ruby, 'If you have motivated and highly professional teachers who continually strive to improve learning outcomes for other students, I believe that means they're demonstrating the attributes of teacher leadership'. Steven said his continuing motivation to become a more effective teacher was made possible through opportunities for teacher leadership. Interactions with colleagues deepened his own knowledge as he found ways to help others. These descriptions illustrate the importance of professional learning to satisfy teachers' moral obligations to make a difference to students and their learning. The teachers interviewed saw leadership as a collective and reciprocal activity rather than defining it in reference to an individual's power, status, title or level of remuneration. When leadership work arises from acting professionally as a teacher, it is no wonder that teacher leadership is a frequently misunderstood term. Interestingly, two of the five teachers interviewed, while

holding formal leadership roles, had a clear preference for what they considered teacher leadership roles, which they said kept their connection to classrooms strong rather than compromising that connection to satisfy compliance and accountability agendas set by their managers. Their explanations of this again reinforce the divide between teaching and what is understood as leadership.

For Steven, leadership disincentives concerned job intensification. He mentioned: having increased responsibilities as a leader in addition to his responsibilities as a teacher, which had not diminished; his dislike of the notion of superiority over colleagues; the level of acceptable risk; and a lack of support from others. He claimed greater satisfaction from situations that enabled colleagues to make sense of their practice alongside each other, involving mutually reciprocal support and expertise.

In short, my search for clarity in terminology has shown that definitions linking a person to a particular leadership type remain unhelpful, for this is not what is important. Rather, the term 'leadership' is the drawcard signifying the collective work to be done and how the work requires the sharing of influence, expertise and support to be completed. Viewing leadership as activities to further student learning is quite different to the conception of a knowledgeable individual in the role of a leader, where status and position are valued over the work to be done.

My working definitions of teacher leader and teacher leadership

In an attempt to provide some clarity and resolve tensions in the terminology, I define 'teacher leader' and 'teacher leadership' as follows:

Teacher leaders are characterised by their enduring commitment to improving students' learning. Their strong sense of moral purpose is what determines their leadership activities. They develop close and collaborative working partnerships with their colleagues through their mutual interest in solving issues of practice that revolve around helping students learn. Their need for learning is met through recognition that their colleagues are a valuable source of expertise and a sphere of influence to which they themselves can contribute. This often involves visiting classrooms in action to help other colleagues plan their next steps. Teacher leaders make their own learning visible to others by actively modelling how to interrogate practice, akin to action researchers following a systematic process of data collection and review to support their colleagues. When they engage in their own leadership learning, their ability to add insights from research enhances the depth of their interactions with colleagues.

This definition stipulates a strong connection between professional learning and leadership. It depicts individuals moving outwards, seeing their colleagues as a mutual source of influence. While the term ‘teacher leader’ is used to highlight the people engaged in teacher leadership, it is the opportunity to make a difference to the lives of students that creates the impetus for leadership.

A reflective tool to guide teacher leadership aspirants’ conceptions of leadership and their next learning focus

With student learning and achievement as the collective focus, I now share details of how a reflective tool or heuristic can be used to raise awareness of what it means to lead and the scope of leadership work. I argue that such a tool may serve a useful purpose in helping individuals to recognise their leadership learning knowledge needs. This heuristic categorises the knowledge needed under five focal points: people, place, system, self and pedagogy. While the first four of these focal points are attributed to the work of Clarke and Wildy (2011), the addition of pedagogy as a fifth focal point was made by Lovett, Dempster and Flückiger (2015). This heuristic tool can be used in multiple ways by individuals to determine leadership learning already undertaken, the source of that learning and what is yet to be learnt. When analysed by cell, row, column and focal point and discussed with an experienced leader, the heuristic provides the opportunity to review conceptions of leadership at the same time as determining next steps in leadership preparation. Further details of the heuristic and its potential are featured in a journal article (see Lovett, Dempster, & Flückiger, 2015).¹

The patterns that can emerge from this type of self-analysis allow the aspirant leader to see where the majority of their leadership learning has been focused. For example, it would be typically expected that a teacher leader would put ‘Yes’ most frequently in the pedagogy focal point and have few ‘Yes’ responses in the system focal point. The dominance of the pedagogy focal point highlights the classroom learning focus of teachers’ leadership work, with its emphasis on planning and assessment processes rather than understandings of broader issues such as knowledge of legislation and regulations and of issues debated at an international level.

Conclusion

In attempting to improve the appeal of leadership work and clarify understandings of teacher leadership, I have shown that leadership need not be viewed solely in

terms of upward trajectories to formal, remunerated roles. Rather it can be equally satisfying when viewed in terms of informal opportunities linking learning with leadership to enhance student learning. What is clear to me is that schools need both formal and informal leadership, but current conceptions are determined by formal positional roles rewarded in the form of title and salary. This needs to change so that informal leadership work, understood as teacher leadership, is valued as an appealing alternative to formal leadership work—and, more importantly, as an essential form of leadership.

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¹ To view the full table ‘Operational version of a heuristic tool to aid reflection on leadership learning’, see Lovett, Dempster, & Flückiger, 2015, at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/figure/10.1080/19415257.2014.891532>