

Differentiating Leadership Styles and Behaviors of Teacher-Leaders

Joshua DeSantis

York College of Pennsylvania, jdesant1@ycp.edu

Stacey N. Dammann

York College of Pennsylvania, sdammann@ycp.edu

Anastasia Clayton

aclayton2@ycp.edu

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Cover Page Footnote

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Josh DeSantis, 441 Country Club Road, York College, PA 17403 – jdesant1@ycp.edu

Differentiating Leadership Styles and Behaviors of Teacher Leaders Introduction

Teacher-leaders personally engage with every constituency within the school including students, their families and communities, other teachers, and school administrators. This positions teacher-leaders to significantly influence schools' culture and operations. In many cases, teachers exercise this influence in formal leadership positions as specialists, instructional coaches, department chairs, and team leaders. Teacher-leaders also adopt informal leadership roles as mentors, professional development presenters, or in school committees. As the demands placed on schools continue to diversify beyond academics to meet the social, mental health, and economic needs of their communities, teacher-leaders are poised to help lead their schools in meeting these challenges.

While teacher-leadership is a critical element of school organization and climate, the wide scope of the work teacher-leaders perform presents challenges in selecting and developing teacher-leaders. Unlike established school leadership roles like those of the principal, superintendent, and other school administrators, no standardized descriptions or policies govern the designation of teacher leader roles or which teachers should fill them (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). In many cases, teachers are assigned, sometimes hesitantly, leadership roles based off of their seniority and their willingness to assume more work and responsibility (Knapp, 2017). Little attention is paid to the personal traits that may, or may not, position teachers for success as a teacher-leader (Margolis & Huggins, 2012). Even less consideration is made to their continued leadership growth and development (Bradley-Levine, 2011; Jacobs et al., 2016). While widely acknowledged as essential to school improvement and operations, teacher-leader selection and development is often left to happenstance.

The present study aims to equip teacher-leadership developers with a more complete understanding of the distinct leadership styles and performances of teacher-leaders. Two questions guided this inquiry; (1) *What differences exist in the leadership behaviors of trained teacher-leaders, untrained teacher-leaders, teachers, and school administrators?* and (2) *What differences exist in the leadership styles of trained teacher-leaders, untrained teacher-leaders, teachers, and school administrators?* Findings from this exploratory study inform school administrators, teacher-leaders, policy makers, and teacher educators on the unique origins of teacher-leaders' leadership styles and behaviors.

Evolution of Teacher-Leadership Roles

Teacher-leadership is a diffuse, but discreet, set of skills, knowledge, and performances, deployed by in-service teachers to impact the educational community beyond their classrooms. This impact is applied in the service of transforming schools in ways that enhance their value, improve their culture, and heighten their efficacy. While the roles, approaches, and behaviors are diverse, teacher-leaders are unified as agents of positive change in their schools beyond the four walls of their classrooms (Danielson, 2006; Levin & Schrum, 2016; Reeves, 2008).

Teacher leadership, as a discipline and as practice, nests within the distributed-leadership model of school organization. Adherents to distributed leadership approaches resist hierarchical decision-making and rigid bureaucratic structures. Instead, distributed leadership prioritizes the significance of the decisions made by all the individuals in a system (Spillane & Diamond, 2007). This can be achieved through a number of practices including the empowerment of flexible and mixed-role teams to solve problems and the implementation of educator-led processes for curricular and instructional improvement (Spillane, 2012). Distributed educational leadership approaches are egalitarian and democratic (Harris & Chapman, 2004; Trujillo &

Renee, 2012) in that they seek to empower all members of a school system to improve their own schools and communities. Though evidence exists that some distributed leadership initiatives exist to mask traditional, ‘top-down’ management decisions (Gronn, 2008; Maxcy & Nguyen, 2006), distributed leadership continues to show promise as a means of improving school culture, curriculum, and efficacy (Harris & DeFaminis, 2016).

The proliferation of the distributed leadership model in the preceding two decades dovetailed with intensified interest in leveraging the potential of teacher-leaders to improve educational conditions in schools (Crowther et al., 2009). While the origins of teacher-leadership as a distinct category of influence and authority in schools are much older, the concept gained impetus in the United States in the early 2000s’ in the wake of the No Child Left Behind Act. School administrators, eager to enhance student standardized test achievement, enlisted teacher-leaders to develop and implement new approaches to impact learning. This was manifested in the propagation of professional learning communities (PLCs) in schools across the United States (DuFour, 2007). PLCs were designed to solicit teacher-derived approaches to school improvement and change that were more effective and durable than those implemented during ‘top-down’ administrator-imposed initiatives (Hargreaves, 2007). PLCs created formal arrangements within schools’ structures, schedules, budgets, that provided teacher-leaders opportunities to meaningfully impact the school beyond the four walls of their classrooms.

Teacher-leadership roles continue to sharpen and evolve to the present day. The Teacher Leader Model Standards, developed by the Teacher Leadership Exploratory Commission (2011) presented seven domains of teacher leadership that orient teacher leaders’ practices. These standards are a key component of the widening professionalization of teacher leadership into a distinct and essential category of teacher leadership (Berg et al., 2014). Local and state education

agencies as well as professional teacher organizations have further advanced this trend by codifying distinct teacher-leadership roles and providing distinct career-advancement opportunities for prospective teacher-leaders (Berry, 2019). Many states took the final step in defining these roles by creating distinctive teacher-leadership licenses or endorsements that educators can pursue (Diffey & Aragon, 2018). Momentum for the development of a defined teacher-leadership professional track continues to build, spurred by the mounting evidence of teacher-leaders' outsized influence in schools.

Teacher Leadership Effects

High-quality teacher leadership can positively impact school communities in a variety of areas. One key area of impact is in improving student achievement. Ingersoll et al. (2017) identified a strong relationship between student achievement and effective instructional leadership. Their work also correlated specific instructional leadership elements involved in the improvement, including holding teachers to higher instructional standards, providing teachers with an effective school improvement team, and developing a unified vision for the school. Shen et al. (2020) identified a similar correlation between high-quality teacher-leadership and academic achievement. Their work established seven key teacher leadership dimensions to associate to student achievement. Out of the seven dimensions they identified, the strongest association with student achievement were teacher-led improvements in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Student achievement improves where schools foster cultures of developing and sustaining high-quality teacher-leadership and empower those teachers to affect improvements.

These benefits do not occur in a vacuum. They require sustained and formal investment in teacher-leadership development. One powerful form of this investment is the creation of teacher-leadership career pathways that challenge teachers to enhance their skills throughout

their career and reward those teachers for that growth (Eckert et al., 2016) Where these investments occur, teacher-leaders are much more likely to meaningfully influence their colleagues in improving their practice (Supovitz & Comstock, 2021).

The Teacher Leaders Schools Need Now

The recent dynamism in the demands placed on our school system necessitate that teacher-leaders continually refine their skill-sets. For example, there is a rapidly proliferating demand for youth mental health awareness and skills among teachers (Weins et al., 2020) Teachers and teacher-leaders need to be prepared to address and guide other teachers and students through discussions on systemic practices that affect people of color (Hill et al., 2020, p. 572). The traditional and colonial education structure needs to be reevaluated and broken down in order to embrace anti-racism, and address issues important to society.

In our developing world, the use of technology utilized by schools, teachers, and students continues to increase. It is important that teacher leaders believe in the technology being promoted to their teachers and students. Peled and Perzon (2022) found a positive correlation between the support of school administration for a 1:1 computing program and the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge of teachers. When teachers hold positive perceptions of information communication technologies (ICT), such as those provided by effective teacher-leadership, results in successful utilization of ICT in the classroom occur (Labontè & Smith, 2022). Schools need knowledgeable and supportive leaders to encourage the application of efficient technological tools.

Today's schools are beset by challenges, including the need to pivot to supporting student mental health and wellness, embedding equity and responsiveness throughout the school experience, and positively responding to the rapid changes to teaching and learning brought on

by rapid technological and societal change. Teacher-leadership will be an important component of overcoming these challenges. It is imperative that teacher-leaders' behaviors and styles be well-understood. Through exploring the relationship between teacher-leaders' behaviors and styles, the necessary mechanisms to solicit teacher-leaders' positive impacts in schools will be enhanced.

Methods

Participants

The present study included ninety-five participants. The population was a sample of convenience composed of professional educators, specialists, and administrators from one county in South-Central Pennsylvania. Participants were made eligible for this study by their status as school administrators at schools in the county, their status as educators in one partner school in the county, or their status as education graduate students at the researchers' institution. The mean age of the population was 47 and participants' ages ranged from 24 to 61. The population included 20 males and 75 females. Over three quarters (82.1%) hold a master's degree, while the rest hold either a doctorate degree (11.6%) or a bachelor's degree (6.3%). The population was grouped into samples as defined in Table 1.

Table 1.

Sub-Population Definitions

Samples	N	Definition
Teachers	29	In-Service educators serving full-time roles as classroom teachers without a leadership role.
Untrained Teacher-Leaders	28	In-Service educators who are currently serving in formal or informal teacher-leadership positions including department chairs, grade level or team leaders, instructional coaches, first-year teacher mentors, and/or as host or cooperating teachers for pre-service educators.
Trained Teacher-Leaders	22	In-Service educators who are enrolled in or have completed a graduate-level teacher-leadership training program.
School Administrators	16	In-service educators who are currently serving in administrative roles as Assistant Principals, Principals, or central office administrators.

Instruments

Participants' leadership styles were determined using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Bass & Avolio, 1995). The MLQ invited participants to engage in critical self-reflection by responding to 45 Likert-scaled items designed to assess participants' leadership styles. Participants' responses were utilized to compare participants' leadership styles using the nine-factor full-range transformational leadership theory proposed by Bass (1985). This theory suggests that leaders adopt one of three leadership styles, transformational, transactional, and passive-avoidant. The transformational leadership style is divided into five subsets; idealized attributes (IA), idealized behaviors (IB), inspirational motivation (IM), intellectual stimulation (IS), and individual consideration (IC). The transactional leadership style is divided into two

subsets; contingent reward (CR) and management by exception - active (MBEA). The passive avoidant management style is also divided into two subsets; management by exception – passive (MBEP) and laissez-faire (LF). The validity of Bass's (1985) transformational leadership model and the accompanying MLQ deployed to measure it has been affirmed in the literature (Antonakis et al., 2003; Dionne et al., 2004; Rowold & Heinitz, 2007). The MLQ is a proprietary instrument owned by the MindGarden Corporation. The MLQ was used under license from the Mindgarden Corporation during this study.

Participants' leadership behaviors will be determined using the Teacher Leadership Inventory (TLI). The TLI was developed by Chen (2020) and was used with permission. The TLI includes 25 Likert-scaled items divided into five subscales. Each subscale describes a discreet category of teacher leadership behaviors including promoting professional learning, focusing on the learning process, encouraging collegial collaboration, engaging in decision-making, and liaising with external affiliations. The TLI invites participants to self-rate the degree to which they agree that they engage in specific leadership behaviors. The validity and reliability of the instrument were affirmed (Chen, 2020). The instrument will be used to explore the degree to which various types of educational decision makers' behaviors are similar or dissimilar.

Design

This study collected primary data to execute a correlational research design. The independent variable for the study was the participants' status as teachers, untrained teacher-leaders, trained teacher-leaders, or administrators. The dependent variables for the study were the participants' leadership styles as measured by the MLQ and their leadership behaviors as measured by the TLI.

Procedures

The researchers prepared digital versions of the MLQ and TLI using a digital survey tool. The digital informed consent and surveys were sent via email to all eligible participants. Respondents who gave consent and completed both instruments were included as participants in the present study. The response data were analyzed using SPSS software.

Results

Data from the TLI were deployed to answer research question one, “What differences exist in the leadership behaviors of trained teacher-leaders, untrained teacher-leaders, teachers, and school administrators?”. The average TLI (TLI Total) for the sample was 3.32 (SD = 0.7) out of a possible 5.0, and scores on the TLI ranged from 1.44 to 5.00. We then dichotomized the TLI into a lower (1.44-3.32¹) and higher (3.36-5.00) range to run a binary logistic regression model to predict which of the independent variables and covariates (or combination thereof) would predict effective leadership styles. In addition, we dichotomized position type into informal (teacher and informal teacher-leaders) and formal (formal teacher-leaders and school administrators). This model was significantly reliable ($X^2=13.302$ (5), $p<.05$) and it correctly predicted 66.3% of the cases. Out of all the variables in the model, position type was positively associated with scores on the TLI. Formal teacher-leaders and school administrators scored higher and were almost two and a half times more likely ($\text{Exp}(B)=2.359$) to score higher on the TLI than teachers and informal teacher-leaders. The results can be found in Table 2. No other variable in the model was significant.

¹ 3.32 was the score at the 50th (50.5) percentile. It cut the sample almost perfectly in half.

Table 2

Logistic Regression Results for TLI

Variable	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Sample 1	.050	.400	.051	1	.901	1.050
Age	.014	.027	.262	1	.609	1.014
Gender	.479	.658	.643	1	.423	1.615
Level of Education	.858	.672	.510	1	.475	1.079
Sample 2*	1.170	.480	5.945	1	.015	2.359
Constant	-4.924	2.377	4.290	1	.038	.007
Model Chi-Square						22.245
Nagelkerke R ²						.179

*p < .05

Data from the MLQ were deployed to answer research question two, “What differences exist in the leadership styles of trained teacher-leaders, untrained teacher-leaders, teachers, and school administrators?”. Since participants were asked to identify their leadership attributes (from a low of 1 to a high of 4), an ordinal regression model was utilized to examine the effect of the independent variable, type of position, on the dependent variable, leadership effectiveness, while controlling for the covariates age, gender, and degree. For this research question no significant relationship was found, as the model was not statistically reliable ($\chi^2=2.887$ (5), $p>.05$). Type of position has no effect on leadership behaviors.

Conclusion

As distributed models of teacher leadership continue to proliferate in schools it is essential to identify the degree to which leadership behaviors and styles manifest themselves in the performance of teacher-leaders. Distributed leadership relies more heavily on the teacher-leaders, and the teachers who occupy these roles are more likely to influence key decisions in educational organizations. By identifying the degree to which teacher-leaders’ leadership behavior and styles are consistent with, or dissimilar from, those of other educational decision

makers, adopters of distributed leadership models can maximize the positive effects of this approach.

This study compared the leadership behaviors and styles of educators. Analysis revealed that trained teacher-leaders and school administrators are significantly more likely to report that they engage in the key distributed leadership behaviors identified in the TLI, including promoting teaching improvement, focusing on students, fostering collaborative culture, active participation in decision making, and engaging with the broader educational community. The data suggested that trained teacher-leaders in the study possessed similar agency and impact as administrators in the schools they serve and that non-leader teachers and untrained teacher-leaders do not. Our analysis also revealed no distinction in the leadership style as measured by the MLQ. Teachers, untrained teacher-leaders, trained teacher-leaders, and administrators reported no differences in the leadership styles they adopt.

Our findings affirm the significant impacts made by trained teacher-leaders in schools. The trained teacher-leaders in the study had similar leadership performance profiles of the school administrator sample and differed dramatically from untrained teacher-leaders. While cohesive state- and national-level teacher-leader policy in the United States remains elusive (Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2011), educators continue to make important decisions and participate in the formation of positive school culture. These benefits are significant and include easing resistance to systemic improvement in schools (Lai & Cheung, 2014), boosting student achievement (Shen et al., 2020), and keeping teachers in the profession (Dauksas & White, 2010). By identifying the existence of distinctive teacher-leadership performances and correlating those performances with those of school administrators, the present study suggests the mechanism by which the benefits associated with effective teacher leadership can be realized.

The present study also supports the growing body of evidence indicating the importance of training for teacher-leaders. While there were no differences identified in participants' leadership styles as measured by the MLQ, the trained teacher-leaders' leadership behaviors in the present study differed from the informal teacher-leaders and non-leader teachers. Organized graduate and post-graduate leadership training significantly differentiated the leadership behaviors of trained and untrained teacher-leaders. This finding affirms the suppositions of other researchers who argue for the more widespread adoption of teacher-leadership professional learning opportunities (García-Martínez et al., 2018; Weiner & Lamb, 2020). Dedicated leadership training is necessary to fully realize the benefits made possible by the adoption of formal teacher-leadership structures in schools.

Distributed-leadership approaches are likely to become more widely adopted as schools and systems heighten their flexibility and responsiveness to rapid change (Kim & Gonzales-Black, 2018; Bush, 2013). Teacher-leaders are an impactful feature of the dynamic leadership approaches required in today's schools. Findings from the present study further advance the case that leadership training is an important mechanism for realizing all the potential benefits of teacher-leadership.

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