

System-School Alignment in Support of Teacher Leadership: An Australian Case Study

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Abstract

This article reports on a case study from Australia contributing to a global research project that explores concepts and definitions of teacher leadership in 12 countries using a three-phase data collection approach: an initial literature review; a survey developed from themes in the literature and conducted in each of the countries; and semi-structured interviews designed to explore in depth the understanding of teacher leadership as perceived by the participants in each country, which is the focus of this article. The findings show a lack of coherence regarding expectations of teachers as leaders and teacher leadership, and emphasizes the need for a system-school alignment in support of teacher leadership wherein the principal and the teachers are respectfully acknowledged and supported as the custodians of their context.

Résumé

Cet article rend compte d'une étude de cas menée en Australie dans le cadre d'un projet de recherche mondial qui explore les concepts et définitions du leadership enseignant dans 12 pays au moyen d'une collecte de données en trois phases : une analyse documentaire initiale; une enquête élaborée à partir des thèmes abordés dans la littérature et menée dans chacun des pays; et des entretiens semi-structurés conçus pour explorer en profondeur la compréhension du leadership enseignant de la part de participants et participantes dans chaque pays, ce qui d'ailleurs est le sujet central

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de cet article. Les résultats montrent un manque de cohérence dans les attentes envers les enseignants en tant que leaders et envers le leadership enseignant en général, et soulignent la nécessité d'une meilleure harmonisation entre système et école afin de soutenir le leadership enseignant de sorte que le directeur et les enseignants soient respectés et soutenus en tant que gardiens de leur milieu.

Keywords / mots clés : teacher leadership, system-school alignment, educational leadership, international study, school-based, context / leadership enseignant, harmonisation entre le système et l'école, leadership éducatif, étude internationale, basé sur l'école, contexte

Introduction

This article reports on one case study from Australia situated within a global research project of the International Study of Teacher Leadership (ISTL) (<https://sites.google.com/mtroyal.ca/istl/home>), which includes university researchers from Argentina, Australia, Canada, Chile, Columbia, Mexico, Morocco, Romania, South Africa, Spain, Tanzania, and Turkey. The research focus of the ISTL is an exploration of across-world understandings of how teacher leadership is conceptualized and enacted in different socio-cultural contexts (Webber, 2023). Initial discussions amongst the ISTL research team soon highlighted that teacher leadership is perceived and enacted quite differently across countries. A mutually agreed approach was to provide case studies of “context-centered interrogation ... especially in relation to its cultural compatibility and sensitivity” (Webber, 2023, p. 4) to lift the global view of teacher leadership influenced by varying factors in specific contexts.

The research group of each country uses the ISTL's collaboratively agreed methodological approach of a mixed methodology using a convergent design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The Australian research team initially completed a document analysis study (Kahler-Viene, Conway, & Andrews, 2021), which explored the Australian federal and state government expectations regarding the recognition of role expectations for teacher leadership. Another previous study (Andrews, Conway, & Smith, 2017) highlights the importance of a relationship between system and school leadership contributing to alignment of system initiatives in school contexts where “system” refers to an overarching organization and management of a group of schools. These understandings underpin the research study reported in this article, particularly the understanding of teacher leadership across a system of schools and the regional office in one education jurisdiction of Australia.

Literature review and theoretical framework

The initial literature review of the ISTL group (Webber, 2018) identified understandings of teacher leadership for the international study. It established a long history of the exploration of teacher leadership including several major reviews (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004) and many other publications such as Barth (2001), Bossert (1977), Crowther, Ferguson, and Hann (2009), Frost (2006), Harris (2005), Katyal and Evers (2004), Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009), Murphy

(2005), and Reeves and Lowenhaupt (2016). More recent publications of relevance for this case study have included Harris and Jones (2019), Pan, Wiens, and Moyal (2023), and Nguyen, Harris, and Ng (2020). While there has been limited consensus on the definition of teacher leadership, one definition that is widely accepted was developed by York-Barr and Duke (2004) in their seminal review of teacher leader literature: “the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement” (pp. 287–288). However, Nguyen et al.’s (2020) review of the empirical research on teacher leadership cites Muijs and Harris (2006), who earlier reported that “it remains the case that the interpretations of teacher leadership vary considerably” (p. 66). The variety of definitions across the literature includes: teacher as influencer rather than role; teacher leaders as agents of change; teacher leader sharing practices associated with peer collaboration or professional learning communities; and teacher leaders influencing beyond classroom (see Nguyen et al., 2020, p. 67). Furthermore, Pan et al. (2023) add that “the field of TL is relatively young and could benefit from additional analysis” (Introduction, para. 2). Thus, the importance of the ISTL study from international contexts that have not previously been captured (see Webber, 2023).

Further reported is what teacher leaders do within schools and how they are acknowledged. Generally, there is a broad view of enactment of teacher leaders, and studies often refer to both informal and formal roles and responsibilities (Crowther et al., 2009; Leithwood, 2007; Neumerski, 2013; Nguyen et al., 2020; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Interestingly, three common facets of teacher leadership were identified from the extant literature by Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009): leadership of students or other teachers; leadership of operational tasks; and leadership through decision making or partnerships. Collaboration is another aspect of teacher leadership that has consistently emerged from the literature (Greenlee, 2007; Harris, 2003; Nguyen et al., 2020; Sterrett, 2015; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). The literature, however, is inconsistent in how teacher leaders are recognized. Some report formal selection processes for a defined role (Birky, Shelton, & Headley, 2006); others report the emergence of teacher leaders taking on informal roles (Crowther et al., 2009; Frost, 2006). Another perspective is that principals, school structures, and cultural norms either impede or enable the emergence of teacher leadership (see Nguyen et al., 2020; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Often, teacher leaders have titles, roles, and responsibilities that are not consistent across schools or systems. This variation in terminology and roles is further complicated by the use of varying terms within one country. For example, in Australia, education systems adopt the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (AITSL, 2011), which uses titles for teacher leaders such as “highly accomplished teacher” and “lead teacher.” The former is a highly effective practitioner who works independently and collaboratively to improve their own practice and the practice of their peers, while the latter is an exemplary teacher who has demonstrated consistent and innovative teaching practices, inside and outside the school, which focus on improv-

ing education opportunities for all students (AITSL, 2011). Both definitions align with the terminology of teacher leader as used in the literature. However, another variation is the reference to teacher leaders taking on formal roles, especially the increasing use of the term “middle level leaders” (de Nobile, 2014, 2021; Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves, & Rönnerman, 2020).

The ISTL framework

The ISTL responded to the call by York-Barr and Duke (2004) for quality research, and by Wenner and Campbell (2017) to focus on the need for clear definitions that direct future research. Further considered was Hallinger’s (2018) call for research in leadership of all types that relate to context (institutional, cultural, economic, political, and school improvement). While the ISTL study was underway, Schott, van Roekel, and Tummers (2020) published a systematic review of teacher leadership noting that many of the studies were authored by Western researchers and called for cross-cultural examination of teacher leadership. The ISTL group continues to fill this gap with specific foci on international contexts previously overlooked (Webber, 2023).

The ISTL literature review (Webber, 2018) captured a summary of the available literature at the time of the group formation with an initial focus on the underlying values and assumptions in teacher leadership research (Table 1).

Table 1. Values and assumptions underlying teacher leadership

Values	Assumptions	Authors
Accountability	Take responsibility for outcomes Evaluation and progress monitoring provide focus	Bone, 2015, Owens, 2015, Webber & Scott, 2012
Advocacy	Student learning needs provide focus Teacher leadership has an activist dimension	Bauman, 2015, Conway, 2015, Lambert, 2003
Cultural responsiveness	Curricula and pedagogy should include students whose identities have been insufficiently considered	Nieto, 2015
Inclusiveness	Teachers should be part of decision-making Career stage considerations are important	Bauman, 2014, Pangan & Lupton, 2015, Steffy, Wolfe, Pasch, & Enz, 2000
Openness to change	Go beyond enculturation to build capacity for transformation	Pangan and Lupton, 2015
Professionalism	Teaching is always an ethical activity Teachers are the single largest influence on students’ academic achievement	Davis, Gilles, McGlamery, Shillingstad, Cearley-Key, Wang et al., 2015, Lambert, 2003, Nieto, 2015
Reflection	Reflective practice should be ongoing	Carr, 2015
Risk-taking	Safety and trust are important	Lambert, 2003
Shared vision	Alignment of goals and mission are valued	Bond, 2015, Bone, 2015
Stability	Practices should be sustainable	Conway, 2015
Teamwork	Professional learning communities provide a venue for collaboration	Conway, 2015, Jackson, Burrus, Bassett, & Roberts, 2010

Source: Webber (2018)

Assumptions and values were noted as one theme emerging from the literature, followed by four others—conceptualization of teacher leadership, motivation for teacher leadership, formal and informal leadership, and political dimension—which helped form the basis of the research question for the ISTL project study: How is teacher leadership conceptualized and enacted and what are the implications for educational stakeholders? The literature review of teacher leadership and the emerging analytical framework upon which the ISTL research design was founded have been used in each ISTL country case study. This enabled a consistent research design and analysis across the internationally based studies (Webber, 2023; Webber & Okoko, 2021), thus the adoption of this analytical framework for the Australian case study presented here.

Methodology

The ISTL project developed a sequential three-phase mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) with quantitative and qualitative data collected, analyzed, and interpreted through a series of country-based case studies that aimed to investigate a global conceptualization of teacher leadership. Working with the overarching research question, the study reported in this article built on a previous document analysis (phase 1) (see Kahler-Viene et al., 2021), which established that the term and role of teacher leadership appeared in policy documentation within the Australian school system. Then the findings of phase 2, a survey conducted in an Australian system, were used to inform phase 3, the interviews. These interviews were designed to explore participants' perceptions of the following sub-research questions:

1. What characteristics of teacher leadership are valued?
2. What aspects are important for developing teacher leadership skills and knowledge?
3. What emerges as an agreement regarding teacher leadership?

These three questions framed the semi-structured interviews which were used to probe for deeper understandings of those that had emerged from the previous phases. The semi-structured interview data are the focus of this article as outlined in the following section.

Data collection, context, and participants

The context of this study was a system of 39 schools located in urban, regional, and remote geographical areas. Drawing on geographical variations in findings from the survey, three schools were selected to represent variations in size, location, and student age range: a small rural primary (elementary) school, a large urban primary (elementary) school, and a large urban secondary (high) school. Each school-based interview dataset was collected from three teachers ($n=3 \times 3$), one middle level leader/deputy principal ($n=1 \times 3$), and their principal ($n=1 \times 3$). Also included were interviews with system-based personnel ($n=5$) from the system office selected to gain an understanding of the perceptions and expectations of the system in which these schools operated.

Participants from each of the three schools and the system office took part in 30–40 minute semi-structured interviews. Each interview was audio recorded in situ and later transcribed for analysis. The three sub-questions used to frame the interviews were designed to explore the participants' understandings of teacher leadership. The findings of each of the three school groups and the system group were initially compiled, followed by a cross-group analysis using the ISTL analytical framework. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from an Australian University with subsequent consent from each of the participants. Following is the report on the analysis of the phase three interviews.

Findings

Small rural primary school

The five participants interviewed in the small rural primary school (the principal, a middle level leader, and three teachers) had limited understandings of teacher leadership. The shared understanding by all teacher interviewees was confined to formal roles: “I had not really heard of it before. I had heard of leadership positions but not really a teacher leader as such” (middle level leader). While some teachers were said to be demonstrating attributes of teacher leadership, “[t]hose people tend to come out of the woodwork and really support and mentor—just because they wanted to help” (teacher), they did not recognize or conceptualize themselves as teacher leaders: “[t]eachers come to me because I have been here for a long time and I can assist. Is that teacher leadership? I am not sure” (teacher). The principal also acknowledged his lack of understanding: “I was going to ask. I assume it is not formalized. We are such a small staff, so everyone takes on jobs.”

The findings from this school demonstrated that without a clear definition and shared understanding of teacher leadership across the school, it is unlikely that teachers and school leaders will realize the full potential of teacher leadership, nor recognize and acknowledge acts of teacher leadership when they occur. The principal, middle level leader, and three teachers indicated the need for professional development in teacher leadership. Their comments—“would be good for people who wanted to step up, know how to communicate their ideas to official leadership or structured leadership” (teacher)—made it clear that professional development opportunities were required to develop the leadership capacity, as explained by the principal: “[i]t was not until she became a formal middle leader through her Deputy Principal role that she was given the opportunity for leadership skill development.”

Large urban primary school

The five participants interviewed (principal, deputy principal, and three teachers) had a collective understanding of teacher leadership that was embedded within the vision and strategic plan of the school. As the principal expressed, “they were the early influencers but also the ones to lead and drive change in the school.” Teacher leaders were seen as experts in pedagogical practice, “somebody who shows expertise perhaps in a particular learning area or in an aspect of pedagogy” (teacher). All three classroom teachers perceived themselves as leaders and had taken on projects or roles beyond their classroom while continuing in their key role as a classroom teacher

but conceded that “[t]he concept of teacher leadership is also narrowly focused on teachers who take on a school initiated or systemic project, in this context.”

A common language used as part of regular school communication was apparent and impacted on school culture. Teachers were encouraged to step forward and take the lead on projects and initiatives important to the school’s growth and development. As the deputy principal stated, “taking on a role, moving out of their comfort zone to lead other classroom teachers was critical in this context,” and one teacher explained, “[t]eachers who grasped the opportunity to become leaders joined a supportive school team.” Apparently, these teachers formed an informal level of middle management that was seen as the conduit between staff and the leadership team; they “galvanize staff around the project [which] underpins the school’s vision, strategic plan and is the driving force of school improvement and the school’s culture, thus the reason for the pivotal role of the teacher leaders” (principal).

Teachers were said to display intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to take on teacher leadership positions, but there appeared to be some deviation about what motivated teachers to take on leadership:

[D]epends on the motivation of the individual person but if a lead teacher has great satisfaction in the change of culture in the school, ... there is satisfaction for the individual person and pride in what they do. (Principal)

[P]eople who are passionate and interested to be part of something bigger than just their classroom. (Deputy principal)

[T]eachers who see a need and have expertise ... those that are respected by colleagues for their own pedagogical expertise ... they can influence others around them. (Teacher)

The interviewees indicated that teacher leader initiatives at the school demonstrated alignment with the school improvement agenda. As the principal indicated:

The goals of the school are ... the moral imperative ... being accountable to each other at a higher level ... [developing] the annual action plan ... from true collaboration in developing these goals [and] because they are taking a part of that goal ... grabbing it and they are influencing other people.

Therefore, while teacher leadership opportunities within the school were available, a teacher indicated that:

[Y]ou learnt on the job, as there was no related professional development offered by the system. [I]n terms of informal teacher leadership, I don’t see that as a system [they are] supporting this initiative. (Teacher)

However, there was mention that the system offered professional development for formal leadership roles.

Large urban secondary school

Teacher leadership was not at the forefront or high on the agenda of any of the

members of the leadership team or staff who were interviewed (principal, deputy principal, and three teachers). For the principal, teacher leaders “are leaders in their classes ... leaders in a classroom they often share with other group of teachers.” It appeared to be an underlying assumption that teacher leadership in the classroom is valued as a necessary component in improving school culture. Those who “take the opportunity to both improve their own practice and improve an area of their interest within the school to engage in leading a group of teachers are valued, supported, and acknowledged as leaders in their specific area of interest” (principal), and “all teachers are leaders in their classroom” (deputy principal).

However, the “all teachers are leaders” mantra was not totally upheld unless it also meant taking on a role to lead other teachers in the school and develop from within the subject departmental structure. Teacher leadership was not named as such but the action of those who took on extra roles was valued and acknowledged. In addition, it depended on the principal or head of department supporting their ideas, as explained by the deputy principal: “[those teachers] who take a risk and present an idea to the leadership team or their head of department.” Furthermore, the notion of when an opportunity arises was seen as a form of teacher leadership: “teachers take the opportunity presented by leadership” (principal), or “they seek to lead a group of teachers in an area of interest or an area of expertise” (teacher).

These roles can be finite or ongoing, but it was agreed that, in all situations, confidence in their ability was the key factor. That confidence came from either their own passion or from being nominated by a middle leader, such as their head of department. Being confident appeared to be valued as a necessary component in improving school culture.

[T]he school provided a safe place to undertake teacher leadership.

The department is a safe place to give something a shot. I think it's safe because I'm trying to model that approach. (Teacher)

The principal has full trust in what I'm doing. (Teacher)

I think teacher leadership is acknowledged, but in different ways, because I don't have a title. (Teacher)

Also, teachers indicated that this experience was important in making decisions to take on leadership roles. Central to a teacher moving beyond the classroom to being recognized as a teacher leader was the personal desire to demonstrate attributes including a mentoring/coaching role, or a collaborative approach that promoted teamwork within their designated department.

I think it's safe to lead, you've got opportunities, experiences that you can use to help others, whether you've got a title or not. (Teacher)

Previous principal told me that I had the skills needed at the time and gave me the opportunity to see if that was what I was interested in doing. (Teacher)

However, there was very little professional learning either systemically or within the school's structure to support development of these attributes or to provide pathways for teachers who aspired to leadership roles.

I haven't had any support as a new middle leader. There doesn't appear to be any structure for identifying potential or emerging leaders. (Teacher)

There seems to be something lacking in terms of support, but not just for leadership, for teacher leaders, but also for emerging, beginning teachers. (Teacher)

There was little consensus or understanding about the political dimension of teacher leadership; as one teacher stated, "they had little influence over policy." However, there was a shared view about teacher accountability linked to data-based evidence and that all teachers were accountable.

System-based personnel

Two directors, two senior education officers, and one other staff member who were interviewed from the system office had a common view of teacher leaders as good classroom practitioners with an area of pedagogical expertise that could be used to develop continuous learning and improvement for themselves and colleagues. From the interviews, a collection of responses stood out:

The real teacher leaders work in the pedagogical model. That's where they see themselves as learners with other learners and working together for everyone's learning.

A person who was not in an official leadership role but who still exercised a leadership function of influence ... as an expert teacher.

It is somebody who firstly exemplifies fantastic effectiveness in their own classroom. [E]xemplary practitioners first and foremost, transparent and having really good communication.

The conceptualization of teacher leadership from the system's perspective focused strongly on the principal's role in identifying and nominating teacher leaders, ensuring a supportive and collaborative environment, and generating collective efficacy within the school.

So, we are trying to develop principals who will encourage their teachers to have a say, to participate in goal setting, to participate in decisions that are going to affect them, you know to share their experiences. We look for people who want to lead, who believe that they are good at something.

It was explained that the teacher leaders who were identified by the principals had positional responsibility to drive whatever project was initiated to contribute to the school's improvement agenda in line with the strategic plan.

Our principals and middle leaders should be able to cherry pick.

Teacher leaders have got two main functions in being a catalyst for change; the idea comes from the ground, [not] from the leadership—it comes from their own experience, ... learning, ... thinking. They are change agents.

The system personnel claimed they supported principals in developing leaders by developing principals' and deputy principals' capability to build collective teacher efficacy within their own context: "Our leadership development programs do a lot of work with principals around their capabilities and how to develop and what we expect of them. A lot of that is around how do they nurture collective efficacy among their staff."

Autonomy was seen as a vital component for teacher leadership to flourish but this was supported within identified boundaries or a strategic framework: "Autonomy within some boundaries . . . if you're looking at innovative approaches, as long as the teachers are checking in, making sure that they're not going outside of particular bounds." And as they acknowledged, "[w]e don't have a teacher leadership framework," which was explained as, "[w]e have worked with our principals and leadership teams around professional learning communities and having expectations of how people would operate."

Cross group analysis

The findings from the interviews were framed by the five themes of the ISTL project: values and assumptions, conceptualization of teacher leadership, motivation for teacher leadership, formal and informal leadership, and political dimension. The analysis enabled a deeper contextual understanding of each theme as pertinent to this case study.

Theme one: values and assumptions

Teacher leaders were seen to be expert classroom practitioners with credibility among the staff, and were approachable, willing to share their expertise, and willing to work in collaboration with other staff to build teacher efficacy or to complete a task-based project that could ultimately improve collegial relationships. This extended to building positive relationships with the community. Teachers who volunteered for additional roles contributed to a culture of collaboration, leading to enhanced staff wellbeing by building positive community-school relations. The accepted notion was that classroom teachers who aspire to teacher leadership took actions that enhanced school outcomes. The actions recorded were: driving change through demonstrating successful practice, sharing pedagogical expertise; undertaking a task or project to share resources; upskilling staff; and/or working in collaboration with others to contribute to the school's improvement agenda.

Those classroom teachers in one school who took on the opportunity to become leaders joined a supportive school team, led by the principal, who believed that trust was a factor in motivating teachers to move out of their comfort zone and lead their colleagues. There was consensus that a safe culture was paramount to the success of a teacher leader ethos in schools and that this emanated from the principal who was responsible for developing this culture of safety and trust so that teacher leaders could take initiatives without concern of consequent risk. That is, they could fail safely and still flourish and continue to learn in these roles. The role and the capacity of principals is therefore paramount in enabling teacher leaders, building collaborative school culture, and developing collective teacher efficacy.

Theme two: the conceptualization of teacher leadership

Overall, participant responses highlighted a lack of clear conceptualization and shared understanding of what constitutes teacher leadership. There was minimal discussion or use of the term teacher leadership in two of the three schools. Furthermore, teacher leadership was not on the formal leadership agenda and only appeared in the vision and strategic plan in one of the schools. Fundamentally, the teacher leader is seen to be a confident member of staff who takes on a specific task or project that is either school- or system-initiated for a finite period.

Formal leaders at each of the interview sites did not associate school leadership with the role of the teacher and there were inconsistencies in both the understanding and the implementation of the role of teacher leaders. However, there were converging perspectives in the role being an informal role where the teacher leaders are good practitioners within an area of pedagogical expertise. This expertise is then shared via a task-based role or initiative to improve their own and others' classroom practice, enhance school culture, and drive the school's improvement agenda.

While teacher leaders are not necessarily officially acknowledged, they do emerge as "impact coaches" or "volunteer mentors," and the role is valued by other colleagues and the formal leadership team, including the principal. When recognized, they were able to serve as the conduit between staff and the leadership team, where they worked to galvanize staff around a project and provide a voice for the staff. In this context, they could act as advocates for other staff as they had access to the principal and leadership team. There was a shared view that teacher leaders are continuous learners, and this results in their having influence with staff beyond their own classroom. Consequently, they garnered respect from other teachers because of their willingness to volunteer and their confidence to share their expert classroom knowledge or understanding around a particular school-based project. Further, they demonstrated willingness to collaborate with others to continually enhance their school's culture.

Theme three: the motivation for teacher leadership

Pedagogical expertise and a willingness to take on extra responsibility were suggested as motivation for participants assuming informal teacher leadership roles. Passion, student wellbeing, interest, and a desire to be on the cutting edge of a school project were also some of the motivations to take up a role beyond the classroom. There was an understanding that helping beginning teachers was a leadership responsibility, and that experienced teachers had confidence in their area of expertise and capability to lead change. They were seen by some as influencers for other staff to buy into a project as they had credibility, and were perceived as expert teachers in their classroom. This was also evidenced in the confidence to put themselves forward for a role or opportunity because they believed they could do a task well, or that their idea had integrity and would be endorsed by the principal.

Coupled with these intrinsic motivations was the opportunity to lead others and be part of change that could improve the school culture. This provided extrinsic motivation to take on the additional role for collective efficacy as well as for positively influencing their own career trajectory. The systemic view of the motivation for teacher leadership was a desire for agency, where a teacher initiates an idea them-

selves and has the capacity and capability to act on their desire to lead change or have an impact on their peers and the collective efficacy of the school.

Theme four: formal and informal leadership

The consensus across the schools was that systemic professional development was focused on upskilling formal leadership positions, such as deputy principals or principals, rather than teachers, to be leaders. Opportunities for teacher leadership were initiated mainly by the principal but were not supported by any systemic or other formal learning pathway. The only professional development in leadership indicated as offered to teachers was an ad hoc aspiring leaders' program provided by the system during the term holiday period. The system indicated that the principal was the central figure in identifying, engaging, and developing potential leaders in their school, whereas the system's responsibility was to build the principal's capacity to enact this. There is currently no accountability mechanism for the system to measure the success of the principal's capacity building or preparedness for implementation of any teacher leadership professional development program within system schools.

There was expression of strong support from two of the principals for those who took on a teacher leadership role, though that support was mostly in the form of acknowledgment of a job well done by the principal and respect by colleagues who valued their contribution. There was a "middle table" at one of the schools that gave teacher leaders, known in this context as "impact coaches," a voice with the principal and senior leadership team. From the principal's perspective, the middle table allowed him to monitor and influence his middle leaders and to ensure that the teacher leaders could help galvanize staff and engender collaboration and commitment to any given project or initiative. This could be viewed as an acknowledgement of their value but could also reduce the autonomy of teacher leaders to maintain control of initiatives through ensuring that projects were undertaken as per line management instructions.

Theme five: political dimension

There was little consensus or understanding about the potential political dimensions of teacher leadership, though there was agreement that teacher leaders had the capacity to advocate for staff members by giving them a voice within the leadership team. From a system perspective, all teachers are accountable, but they have little influence over policy and while they have a degree of autonomy, teacher leaders work within a defined framework, which was described as "autonomy with parameters."

The principal was viewed as critical to position, power, and autonomy of teacher leaders within the school. Their role in establishing a safe environment was deemed important for teacher leadership to flourish. The system had a clear view that teacher leadership cannot be enabled or sustained in a divisive, unsupportive environment; however, there was no suggestion offered about supporting a capacity building approach into a principal leadership program. While there was a view expressed that some who sought a leadership position might be strategic in their intent to gain a formal leadership position, there was no role description or progression pathway for teacher leaders to achieve such a goal.

Further, results from the interviews revealed responses from the three schools ranging from very little use or knowledge of the term “teacher leadership” through to a comprehensive, shared understanding informing decision-making in support of student achievement. This range of responses also emerged among the system-based personnel.

Given that there was strong support for “teacher leadership” in the rural school, even though the term may not be used to describe action, such leadership action would be valued given the location of these schools. Meanwhile, the urban primary school that did acknowledge teachers as leaders reported benefits both within the school and across school networks of professional sharing. However, respondents indicated there was no professional development offered to “teacher leaders” within the system like that offered to formal leaders. It was acknowledged that some of those identified as “emerging leaders” within the system might be offered opportunities to grow into leaders.

Discussion

In the literature, teacher leadership is recognized as having a positive effect on school improvement, school effectiveness, and student outcomes (Conway & Andrews, 2016a; Nguyen et al., 2020; Pan & Chen, 2020; Pan et al., 2023). However, this capacity was not embraced generally within the system in this study. Other studies (Beachum & Dentith, 2004; Muijs & Harris, 2006; Pan et al., 2023) reported similar situations and indicated that teacher leadership may not be embraced or acknowledged, thus presenting as inhibitors to growing teacher leaders in schools (see also Petersen, 2015). As Nguyen et al. (2020) report, “A heavily top-down, rigid and opaque structure, it is suggested, may act as a hindrance to teacher leadership (e.g., Foster, 2005; Muijs & Harris, 2006)” (p. 69). This array of literature further highlights the need for exploration of contextual factors that influence the emergence and support of teacher leadership as provided by the compilation of case studies in the ISTL publication (Webber, 2023), thus the importance of the case study reported in this article.

Notably, the role of the principal in supporting and developing teacher leaders was mostly absent in this study, despite the literature reporting that principal leadership is an important factor in growing teacher leaders (Cheng & Szeto, 2016; Smith, Hayes, & Lyons, 2017; van der Vyver, Kok, & Conley, 2020; Woodhouse & Pedder, 2017). Other studies (Conway & Andrews, 2016b; Crowther et al., 2009; Mangin, 2007) have noted that the development of teacher leaders in schools often depends on principals providing space and opportunities for teachers to lead, which is influenced by their knowledge of teacher leadership or their leadership beliefs (Pineda-Báez, Bauman, & Andrews, 2020), which in this study was notably varied among participants.

Given the limitations on the common understanding of teacher leadership arising from this study, it cannot be assumed that principals of this system have the capacity to recognize, cultivate, or effectively utilize teacher leaders within their school (Anderson, 2004; Cheng & Szeto, 2016; Conway & Andrews, 2016a; Cooper, Stanulis, Brondyk, Hamilton, EMacaluso, & Meier, 2016; Mangin, 2007). Such ini-

tiatives need to be fostered through introducing common school discourse across the school system of this study, providing formal and informal mentoring, collaboration opportunities, and professional development opportunities. There also needs to be established structures and conditions for schools across the system that will support a coherent vision and strategy in relation to teacher leadership in schools (Cooper et al., 2016).

Based on the findings of this study, future research is warranted on three important aspects of teacher leadership. First, for schools and school systems, individually and collectively, to align the vision, strategy, and role expectations for teacher leaders across the school and school system to achieve comparable and consistent understandings and expectations. Second, there is a need to further develop leadership practices and capabilities within the teacher cohort through promotion of mentoring and coaching opportunities and professional development opportunities for aspiring leaders. Finally, there is need for the contributions of teacher leaders to be acknowledged, internally and externally, and teacher leaders must be supported to develop aspirational leadership capacity within individual schools and across school systems.

Limitations

Albeit a limited study for the relatively broad topic of teacher leadership, it was important to conduct a study of this scope to gain a deeper sense of understanding of the participants in their specific contexts. This was an important aspect considered by ISTL researchers (Webber, 2023) who have an ongoing quest to add conceptually relevant studies on teacher leadership from varying global contexts. Thus, the relevance of this study contributing to the larger international study conducted by the ISTL group is of importance with acknowledgement that this Australian case study needs extension to include other educational systems in all states of Australia.

Conclusion

Much has been revealed in this study regarding the role of the principal in building leadership capacity within the school as reflected in earlier literature (see Crowther et al., 2009; Lambert, 2018). The importance of the principal's knowledge and skills in recognizing, encouraging, and supporting the contributions of emerging teacher leaders is essential. Meanwhile, interesting perspectives are emerging from the ISTL group as researchers share the findings of what is meant by teacher leadership in varying socio-cultural contexts of different cultural norms and expectations (Arden & Okoko, 2021; Pineda-Báez et al., 2020; van der Vyver et al., 2021; Webber, 2023). The ongoing ISTL research illustrates that contextual confusion pervades in terms of definitions of teacher leadership, recognition of teachers as leaders, roles and responsibilities of teacher leaders, and influences in varying cultural contexts related to authority and expectations of the teacher as distinct from the leader (see also Nyugen et al., 2020).

Furthermore, this Australian-based study confirms there is more to be gained from the field in practice than from the imposition of definitions/frameworks/strategies developed elsewhere. Genuine credence needs to be given to teachers being the key to making a difference, being courageous, and contributing to the overall

success of student achievement, and especially to those who reach beyond their classrooms to “make a difference” in collegial support, influence, and collective responsibility within the broader community.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare. Ethics approval H19REA075 was granted by the Ethics Office of the University of Southern Queensland, Australia.

Note

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