Teacher leadership: toward a new conceptual framework

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Abstract
Purpose – Conceptual ambiguity about the term “teacher leadership” has retarded development of useful research on this topic. The purpose of this paper is to propose a conceptual framework that researchers might utilize to clarify key assumptions embedded in their use of the term “teacher leadership,” enabling members of this research community to better understand and build upon each other’s work and to develop a knowledge base on teacher leadership.

Design/methodology/approach – In 2016 a community of researchers convened in a conversation about their varied conceptions of teacher leadership. The authors analyzed documentation from this convening to identify key ways in which members’ conceptions of teacher leadership diverged. They then drew upon the teacher–leader research literature and their own experiences with teacher–leader initiatives to propose a conceptual framework that would support researchers to define teacher leadership in ways that meet established criteria for an empirically-useful concept.

Findings – Four dimensions of teacher leadership that should be referenced in an empirically-useful definition of teacher leadership are: legitimacy, support, objective and method. It is hypothesized that clarifying one’s assumptions about each of these dimensions and providing descriptive evidence of how they are instantiated will address the conceptual ambiguity that currently stymies the accumulation of knowledge in this field.

Originality/value – This paper presents a framework that can provide a strong foundation for the development of a knowledge base on teacher leadership, which is needed to inform education leaders’ efforts to maximize teachers’ leadership influence as asset for improving teaching, learning and schools.

Keywords Conceptual framework, Teacher leadership, Leadership, Networks, School improvement, Professional community

Paper type Conceptual paper

Teacher leadership: developing a new conceptual framework

The research base on teacher leadership is notoriously weak. While there is no shortage of research studies on teacher leadership, existing studies do not currently add up in ways that lead to strong conclusions about what works when it comes to teacher leadership. This situation persists because “teacher leadership” is an inconsistently defined term.

This problem was documented in 1990 by Smylie and Denny, who identified the diverse ways teacher leadership has been defined by its activities, roles and objectives throughout the twentieth century. Over a decade later, York-Barr and Duke made a similar observation during their quest to answer the question “what is known about teacher leadership?” (2004, p. 255). Another decade later, Neumerski’s (2013) effort to rethink instructional leadership with teacher leadership in mind was largely foiled by the fact that “there is little consensus around what constitutes ‘teacher leadership,’ ” (p. 320). She called teacher leadership “an umbrella term referring to myriad of work” (p. 320). This paper attempts to get beneath that umbrella. It proposes a new conceptual framework for defining...
teacher leadership in an effort to move the field toward a more empirically-useful conception of teacher leadership.

The conceptual ambiguity surrounding teacher leadership is problematic for many reasons. First and most fundamentally, it limits researchers’ ability to understand one another. In one research study, a “teacher leader” is one who participates in school-level decision making, in another she is an instructional coach providing growth-oriented feedback to colleagues, in another a teacher leader conducts action research of her own design, and in still another, she has a powerful voice in advocating for change in state education policy. Researchers draw different lines in the sand as they define what counts as teacher leadership based on the context and perspective of their inquiry, yet these lines are often obscured by the umbrella term “teacher leadership.” While it is unnecessary, and frankly unlikely, that scholars will come to agreement about what teacher leadership is, we must recognize that our ability to engage in productive dialogue about teacher leadership is stymied by the lack of shared language for talking about our different conceptions of teacher leadership.

This leads to a second reason the conceptual ambiguity is problematic: It limits researchers’ abilities to build theory and establish a knowledge base about teacher leadership. Since researchers carry contrasting assumptions about what falls under the umbrella of teacher leadership, it is important, but sometimes challenging, to determine which studies are relevant enough to inform future lines of inquiry. Are findings about teacher leaders’ roles in school decision-making relevant to a study about the challenges literacy coaches face in facilitating instructional change with peers? In what ways might findings from a study about the impact of teacher action research be useful to a researcher examining the role of teacher leaders in state education policy? As noted by Mangin and Stoelinga (2008), “The absence of a common vocabulary and common understandings undermines the potential of [teacher leader] positions and the development of a coherent body of research that links roles, actions and outcomes” (2008, p. 6). As a result, research on teacher leadership remains “largely atheoretical” (York-Barr and Duke, 2004, p. 291). In a recent review of the literature on teacher leadership, Wenner and Campbell noted that only 33 of the 54 reviewed studies relied on theory to support the research. In fact, these 33 studies deployed 25 different theoretical frameworks, further underscoring the continued lack of a shared foundation in this field of study. Pondering the root causes of this state of affairs, Wenner and Campbell concluded that “the lack of clarity surrounding teacher leadership holds the potential to inhibit the field from building on others’ work” (2016, p. 25).

The lack of a shared foundation of knowledge about teacher leadership is also a problem – and an urgent one – for the education leaders in policy and practice who are left to attempt to advance teacher leadership by trial and error, instead of with the guidance of research. Schools and districts are creating new roles, institutions of higher education and state education agencies are creating new credentials, and individual teacher leaders are creating their own initiatives in the name of teacher leadership. These education leaders are in need of research-based guidance but are stymied by the ambiguity around the term “teacher leadership.” Thirty years ago, Yarger and Lee (1994) warned that “in the absence of conceptual frameworks for guiding program development and evaluation, teacher leadership programs will continue to be sporadic, idiosyncratic events” (p. 235). This has proven to be largely true. Teacher leadership programs routinely run for a few budget cycles or the duration of a grant, then, lacking evidence of impact and frameworks to guide the collection of such evidence, they fade away.

Most importantly, the conceptual ambiguity around teacher leadership must be addressed due to the urgency of equal access to educational opportunity. Educational opportunity depends upon, among other things, the way that teachers relate to students and how they help students create a relationship with knowledge. The triad of teachers, students, and knowledge is the core of educational practice (Elmore, 1996; Cohen et al., 2003) and, as
Elmore (1996) argues, propagating change at this core level and at scale depends on teachers influencing other teachers. Such influence is teacher leadership, defined most generally (York-Barr and Duke, 2004). Our ability to maximize teacher leadership as a resource for educational improvement, including improvement of equal educational opportunity, is limited by the lack of a cumulative, theoretically coherent body of knowledge about teacher leadership.

The objective of this paper is to propose a framework that researchers can utilize to clarify key assumptions embedded in their use of the term, and thus increase the likelihood that others can build upon their work.

Background: a community without consensus

Researchers of teacher leadership gather each year for a Teacher Leadership Congress during the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. This yearly convening was initiated when, at the 2012 conference, a roundtable presentation on teacher leadership spilled over into an extended discussion about the lack of empirical research on teacher leadership, the lack of shared definitions or frameworks needed to create such research, and what might be done about it. Researchers who agreed with the concern committed to convening a community of researchers to tackle this problem.

By the AERA meeting in 2013, a community was established with a mission to improve teaching and learning by providing an interdisciplinary and collaborative network to support high-quality research that informs the policy and practice of teacher leadership and guides efforts to maximize the leadership influence of teachers in education. As of 2016, over 200 researchers and practitioners had joined the online community, and dozens of these members convened face-to-face annually during AERA in a Teacher Leadership Congress, a three-hour interactive conversation intended to move the field toward better scholarship about teacher leadership. (For more on the Teacher Leadership Congress, see Berg et al., 2018).

By 2016, the community had recognized how widely conceptions of teacher leadership vary and accepted that there would be no consensus on a definition of teacher leadership. Therefore, at that year’s community meeting, attended by approximately 70 researchers and practitioners from dozens of US states and several countries, participants collaborated to identify the key ways in which their conceptions of teacher leadership differ.

Agreeing to disagree

The work took place in two phases. The first engaged participants in an examination of three commonly cited conceptual frameworks for teacher leadership (see Table I). In the first, Murphy (2005) describes two “pathways” to teacher leadership – role-based strategies and community-based strategies – via 14 “domains.” In the second, Taylor (2008) describes variation in instructional coaching models by means of four basic dimensions, three procedural dimensions and eight structural dimensions. In the third, York-Barr and Duke (2004) outline the path of teacher leadership to student learning and describe the inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes of teacher leadership in terms of seven elements. While these three frameworks are often referenced in research on teacher leadership, they have not served to provide consistency in how scholars describe teacher leadership. Indeed, with so many components, using these frameworks would be cumbersome for this purpose. Which few components reference the distinctions that matter most in types of teacher leadership?

At the Congress, each table of approximately nine participants examined one framework, then triads from each table combined with triads from other tables in order to have cross-framework conversations about the merits of each framework for distinguishing between types of teacher leadership and what might be missing. These triads were then asked to identify – from the literature or their own experience – the
components that were most important to a useful definition of teacher leadership and to chart them to share with the group.

The second portion of the meeting was organized using an “unconference” structure in which participants were invited to nominate a topic about which they wanted to connect with others. After multiple topics had been nominated and were each assigned to a table, participants self-selected a table group to join or moved among them. At one table, a small group that included the authors experimented with creating concept maps of key terms that were found on the charts from the earlier part of the meeting. Members at each table took responsibility for capturing key ideas from their conversation in a shared collection of GoogleDocs and for reporting a summary of their discussion for the group. Thus, the authors were able to benefit from hearing the community’s reactions to their initial concept-mapping work and were able to review notes taken in the other unconference topic discussions.

After the AERA annual meeting, the authors of this paper continued developing the concept-mapping work into a hypothesis that could be presented back the community from whence the ideas came. We experimented with new ways of mapping the ideas including through the use of ATLAS.ti to analyze patterns in how terms were used within the notes taken by Congress participants and to discover in vivo codes (see Figure 1). We also considered the questions and concerns generated at this meeting, reviewed relevant literature and sought out related theories. Finally, we drafted frameworks and tested them in context of our own varied and extensive experiences with growing, supporting and studying teacher leaders.

### Conceptual framework: toward distinctions that matter

As we pondered the question of how other professional communities have dealt with similar questions of conceptual variation, we were drawn to some thinking from an earlier time. Throughout the 1950s, many researchers focused their attention on “attitude,” something that seemed central to human behavior. At the time, “attitude,” much like teacher leadership today, was an umbrella term being used in different ways, which interfered with
theory-building and knowledge development. Blumer (1955) offered a set of requirements to stimulate more productive thinking about attitude as a theoretical concept. He wrote:

A satisfactory concept in empirical science must meet three simple requirements:

1. It must point clearly to the individual instances of the class of empirical objects to which it refers;  
2. It must distinguish clearly this class of objects from other related classes of objects; and  
3. It must enable the development of cumulative knowledge of the class of objects to which it refers. (p. 59)

Blumer’s requirements seemed to apply to the definitional problem plaguing researchers of teacher leadership. “Teacher leadership,” as a concept, meets none of these requirements. It is an “umbrella” term and experts disagree about what falls under it. However, by examining the language that individuals in this community use to point to instances in their work and to distinguish the objects of their studies from others, and by comparing that language to what we found in research and practice, we believed we could identify dimensions that would aid scholars in addressing Blumer’s first two criteria: identifying the “class of empirical objects to which (teacher leadership) refers,” and surfacing distinctions between “related classes of (teacher leadership).” Doing so would lay groundwork for the third: “enable the development of cumulative knowledge.”

Our concept-building process had several limitations. It was initiated by meeting notes that were not collected systematically. We do not know the makeup of the meeting participants in detail; they had varying backgrounds, prior relationships, and wide-ranging interests in the concept of teacher leadership. Their number varied between 50 and 70 members throughout the three-hour session and was comprised of both researchers and practitioners from North America, Europe, Australia and Asia. The diversity of the group is an asset that brought an enriching variety of perspectives, but we are aware that there was room for miscommunication and misinterpretation. In addition, participants were not given specific instructions on note-taking and thus the notes we examined varied in detail and length. These meeting notes, then, could not serve as the basis for empirical claims. Instead, we viewed them as a rich source of information and insight in support of our modest aim: to

Figure 1. Sample concept map of language used by community members
propose some conjectures about how researchers might unpack the umbrella term “teacher leadership” and define it more usefully within their studies, reports and discussions.

**Conceptualizing teacher leadership**

We hypothesize that there are four key dimensions of the concept “teacher leadership.” They are the source of legitimacy, the support to accomplish the work, the objective of teachers’ influence and the method of influence (see Table II). In research and in practice, when scholars point to a specific example of “teacher leadership” and/or attempt to distinguish it from other examples, they use terms that reference these four concepts. The sections that follow describe each dimension, illustrating ways that each varies in practice.

**Legitimacy**

Legitimacy addresses the question of how it is that a teacher might be able or allowed to influence others. We saw many perspectives on this question among members of this professional community.

Some participants in the professional community described legitimacy of teacher leadership as originating principally from teachers’ own volition. In their view, teachers can simply and informally “assume ownership” of teacher leader status. For such teacher leaders, their claim to legitimacy is their own, as they choose to pursue a Masters in Teacher Leadership, a grant-funded fellowship program or a state teacher-leader endorsement, often without the permission or even knowledge of anyone at the school or district level. In fact, these participants might describe agency as a defining characteristic of teacher leadership, believing that if a teacher is told or required to assume a leadership role, they may be a “teacher leader” in name, but in fact regarded by their peers but as an “obedient sucker.” Can one declare oneself to be a teacher leader? Participants in our professional community did not agree upon the answer.

Further, some teachers find leadership responsibilities assigned to them or thrust upon them by virtue of circumstance. For example, a physics teacher may be expected to mentor the only other physics teacher in the school, or a middle school teacher may be assigned to the district’s Middle Grades Redesign Team simply by virtue of having last period free each Tuesday when the committee meets. Can you be a teacher leader by circumstance, or is active agency on the part of the teacher required?

Legitimacy of teacher leadership was also described as something that might emerge as teachers are recognized as leaders by colleagues who, for example, admire their experience as an accomplished teacher. Members of this community described teachers who are perceived to have a significant influence on their colleagues as teacher leaders even though they may hold no formal role and may not be aware of having such significant social capital. Can you be a teacher leader and not know it?

Still others discussed teacher leadership with an assumption that legitimacy must come from external, formal validation. Such validation might come from administrators who anoint the teacher by assigning a role and/or title, from district leaders who post positions and hire through formal processes, or from higher education or non-profit partners who might select the teacher as a fellow or certificate program participant through a competitive application process. Whose endorsement is necessary to be regarded as a teacher leader?

Our analysis suggested that the researchers and practitioners in this community disagreed about which source or combination of sources of legitimacy is required for “teacher leadership.” At the same time, whatever its source, legitimacy was always a precondition of leadership. Thus, we propose that clarifying any assumptions and describing any data that one has about the source of teacher leaders’ legitimacy, whether in a research study or in guidance for practitioners, is essential to ensuring that others can make judgments about a work’s applicability to their own research or practice.
The term “teacher leadership” implicitly includes these four dimensions. Researchers tend to be inconsistent about the extent to which they make their assumptions about these dimensions explicit. The examples in the table below are provided to expand readers’ thinking about the range of possibility within each dimension.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legitimacy</td>
<td><strong>Potential sources of legitimacy</strong>&lt;br&gt;- Assigned title, compensation, job description&lt;br&gt;- Possession of specialized knowledge and skill&lt;br&gt;- Recognition as an experienced, accomplished teacher&lt;br&gt;- Personal and/or professional regard of colleagues/perceived influence&lt;br&gt;- Situational, positional circumstances&lt;br&gt;- Credential, e.g. Teacher Leader Certification or degree&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;<strong>Who decides?</strong>&lt;br&gt;- Self-determined&lt;br&gt;- Recognized by colleagues&lt;br&gt;- Selected/assigned authority by administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td><strong>Sample supports</strong>&lt;br&gt;- Time: Compensated in money or release time&lt;br&gt;- Professional culture&lt;br&gt;- Differentiation of work tasks&lt;br&gt;- Vision/guidance from principal to work toward shared goals&lt;br&gt;- Leadership skill development&lt;br&gt;- Principal as co-leader and co-leader with teacher leaders&lt;br&gt;- Connection to other teacher leaders outside of school&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;<strong>Who provides?</strong>&lt;br&gt;- Self-supporting&lt;br&gt;- Network of teacher leader colleagues&lt;br&gt;- School or district administration&lt;br&gt;- Higher education or non-profit partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective</td>
<td><strong>Possible targets of change/improvement</strong>&lt;br&gt;- Instruction&lt;br&gt;- School or professional culture&lt;br&gt;- Organizational structures and decision-making&lt;br&gt;- Whole school reform&lt;br&gt;- Policy&lt;br&gt;- Resources to meet students’ needs&lt;br&gt;- Teacher satisfaction and retention&lt;br&gt;- Professionalization of teaching: Higher regard for teachers as professionals&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;<strong>Who decided?</strong>&lt;br&gt;- Self-determined&lt;br&gt;- Collegial perception&lt;br&gt;- Prescribed by role/program designer or funder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td><strong>Sample methods of influence</strong>&lt;br&gt;- Facilitating&lt;br&gt;- Educating&lt;br&gt;- Coaching&lt;br&gt;- Advocating&lt;br&gt;- Directing&lt;br&gt;- Evaluating&lt;br&gt;- Inspiring&lt;br&gt;- Negotiating&lt;br&gt;- Connecting&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;<strong>Who decides?</strong>&lt;br&gt;- Self-determined&lt;br&gt;- Duties assigned by administrator&lt;br&gt;- Collegial request</td>
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Table II. Four dimensions of teacher leadership
Support
Where does the support for teacher leadership activities come from? Some assumed that the time, training and resources required for effective influence would come from an external sponsor of the role. Others assumed teachers would secure these supports as part of their responsibilities in the role.

Within conversations in our professional community, teacher leadership was often associated with external sources of support such as compensation from school or district administrators, training from higher education partners, or networking support from other organizations including non-profits, unions and the federal government. For some participants, the very presence of such supports seemed to confirm teachers’ roles as leaders.

However, teacher leaders who are officially assigned (with external legitimacy) often do not receive such supports. Team leaders for example, are frequently asked to step into their role without time, training or guidance. In fact, one might say the fact that they are not supported and can do it on their own is precisely why they are teacher leaders. Some researchers in our community took this view. According to these researchers, teachers were described as teacher leaders because they sought out support on their own (including time, training, materials, resources, information or access), or were afforded freedom in how they use their time, who they influence and how. They described the teacher leaders as activists or entrepreneurs, who identify a problem, devise solutions and then seek and secure the resources to address it. They may experience indirect support, such as encouragement of a university program to pursue action research or planning resources from Teach to Lead, but the fundamental belief, in this line of thinking, is that teacher leaders are those who break ranks to address problems of practice without waiting for support or permission.

As was the case with “legitimacy,” there was broad agreement that teacher leadership requires support, but diversity in assumptions of just how this happens in practice. Consequently, we hypothesize that research on teacher leadership will be more useful if it takes care to describe the source and nature of the support teachers draw upon in their leadership activities.

Objective
What is the objective of teachers’ influence? Teaching and learning are clearly at the heart of teachers’ core work, but how directly must teachers influence teaching and learning to be considered teacher leaders?

Some members of this professional community were focused solely on teachers who are promoting instructional change among their colleagues, and might even go as far as to say that if teachers are not influencing the instructional practice of colleagues, then they are not practicing “teacher leadership.” They were focused on such roles as instructional coaches, mentors, peer assistants and professional learning leaders. Others cast a wider net to include those who have an impact on cultural conditions (e.g. trust, reflective practice or collaboration) or structural conditions (e.g. curricular decisions, staffing or schedule) affecting teaching and learning. Still others include teachers’ roles in policy as teacher leadership: This might include the teacher who lobbies for a new school lunch program, advises the state on new licensure regulations, serves on a school board or assumes leadership of the teachers’ union.

Whether researchers using the term “teacher leadership” are referencing a narrow objective, are open to any possible target a teacher may influence, or something in between, it seems clear that there is much about the actual enactment of leadership that could differ as objectives differ. It follows that it is important that scholars clarify any assumptions about the objectives of teacher leadership that are embedded in their work because other scholars may not share them.
Method
Leadership is influence. What expectations or assumptions do researchers hold about the methods by which teachers influence others?

We perceived a variety of ways that researchers and practitioners view teacher leaders’ method of influence. Some scholars focus on the direct, intentional influence that teacher leaders might exert, for example, through modeling of their own core practices, leading professional learning, facilitating dialogue within communities of practice or conducting observations with feedback. Others focus on indirect, intentional influence such as negotiating for institutional resources and support.

Yet others include teachers who influence the work of colleagues in unintentional ways, such as through their dispositions, (e.g. being positive, welcoming, risk-taking). Research increasingly points to the value of social capital on teaching culture and student learning. Are you a teacher leader, for example, if you are a model of reflective practice and collaboration, or are you just being a professional?

Additionally or instead, scholars might assume teacher leaders are those who take a more hierarchical position of facilitator, decision-maker or mediator. These roles might be accompanied by traditional supervisory actions such as directing, approving or evaluating. But how high up the hierarchy can a teacher go and still be a teacher leader? Some unions have taken the position that evaluation goes too far. Other unions that have negotiated Peer Assistance and Review programs take the opposite stance: peer evaluation is a hallmark of professional work.

Thus, members of this professional community have varied expectations about what types of leadership methods count as teacher leadership. Like objective, source of legitimacy and source of support, specifying the method through which teacher leaders are exerting influence appears to be essential to defining the kind of teacher leadership that is the object of study.

Discussion
Progress in research on teacher leadership is stymied by a lack of consensus and clarity about what teacher leadership is. In this paper, we propose four dimensions – legitimacy, support, objective and method – that allow researchers to “point clearly” to teacher leadership, “distinguish clearly this class of objects from other classes of objects,” and “enable the development of cumulative knowledge” about teacher leadership (Blumer, 1955, p. 59).

We observed that this task is currently confounded by a similar lack of clarity around two frequently cited sub-classes: formal teacher leadership and informal teacher leadership. The formal/informal dichotomy was the distinction that members of the professional community most often employed as they sought to describe different approaches to teacher leadership and is frequently cited in the research literature (e.g. Fairman and MacKenzie, 2012, 2014; Harris, 2003; Little, 2003; Wenner and Campbell, 2016; York-Barr and Duke, 2004). Clearly, many researchers and practitioners find the formal/informal distinction to be pointing to something useful. However, we suggest that these terms mask deeper distinctions that are important. When tempted to use the terms “formal” and “informal,” researchers and practitioners might ask themselves the following questions about the given case of teacher leadership under study:

(1) What is the basis for the teacher leader’s claim to legitimacy?
(2) How are the teachers’ leadership actions supported and by whom?
(3) What are the objectives of the teacher leadership activities?
(4) What methods are deployed in pursuit of those objectives?
Fairman and MacKenzie’s 2014 narrative case study illustrates how the “formal/informal” dichotomy is, in some cases, a way of addressing concern about the legitimacy of a claim to leadership. One teacher noted: “Formal leaders are considered leaders because of the positions they hold and may or may not be effective. Informal leaders, while they may not hold a defined leadership position, are always effective,” (p. 73). This teacher perceives contradictions with regard to legitimacy. While a role may have been legitimized by a “defined leadership position,” a more authentic form of legitimacy, in her opinion, is whether the leader is “effective.” Fairman and MacKenzie offer further description of sources of legitimacy that teachers in their study accept as credible:

Leaders were respected based on their knowledge about instruction in their particular grade/content, the range of experiences in the school, and their risk-taking ability. Leaders had influence, brought clear information to the team, collaborated with the group to plan action steps and were willing to contribute time to a project. (2014, p. 74)

To these teachers, what matters most is what a teacher knows, has done, and is still doing to earn legitimacy as a leader among colleagues. In another context, however, one could imagine that policymakers and administrators who have a need to count or control teacher leaders might take the opposite view, focusing their attention only on teachers who have been legitimized by a formal leadership role and possibly only those who they have legitimized themselves.

We have suggested that research on teacher leadership needs to address the question of support for leadership apart from legitimacy. The research literature underscores the importance of this distinction. For example, a teacher’s involvement in instructional improvement requires availability of time to meet with other teachers and other supports for joint activity (Gigante and Firestone, 2008; Wells et al., 2010). While this support may come through school administrators, a formally designated role is not a guarantee that necessary supports will be in place (Coburn et al., 2010; Gigante and Firestone, 2008; Smylie and Denny, 1990; Weiner, 2011). Support can also come from other sources such as external improvement initiatives (Cohen et al., 2014; Galosy and Gillespie, 2013; Heenan and Helms, 2013). In addition, there is evidence that once collaborative work between teachers has started, it can continue with minimal or no official support (Coburn et al., 2010; Fairman and MacKenzie, 2014).

As with legitimacy, simply identifying teacher leadership as “formal” or “informal” is not enough to enable empirical study of the leadership: describing and understanding teacher leadership requires a more nuanced and complete description of how it is supported.

Returning to the quotation from the teacher in Fairman and MacKenzie’s (2014) paper, the key value that distinguished formal and informal teacher leadership in her mind was that informal leadership was “effective.” Judgments about effectiveness are necessarily, even if implicitly, framed in terms of some intended effect or objective, and different participants within a school may have different understandings of those objectives (Cooper et al., 2016; Lambert, 2003; Weiner, 2011). When leadership emerges from the bottom-up, the importance of empirical enquiry into objectives is perhaps self-evident, since the objectives are developed by the individual teachers pursuing them (Galosy and Gillespie, 2013). However, it is equally important in top-down, administratively sanctioned teacher leadership settings since, in these settings, objectives are often ill-defined, shift over time and differ in the course of implementation from the initial administrative intent (Cooper et al., 2016; Donaldson et al., 2008; Spillane, 1998; Weiner, 2011).

Finally, it is worth interrogating assumptions about methods that will be deployed to meet those objectives. For example, Cooper et al. (2016), in studying a group of teachers focused on similar objectives, distinguished between those who focused their energies on influencing colleagues and those engaged in activities aimed directly at changing practices, finding that teacher leaders focused directly on change were more effective.
On the other hand, Donaldson et al. (2008) found that teacher leaders who engaged in direct action toward change encountered more resistance from colleagues. In some cases, this resistance caused the teacher leaders to modify their method of interaction to place more emphasis on facilitation, as “just teachers” (2008, p. 1104) rather than as experts, thereby diminishing their claim to legitimacy (another dimension) as teachers with particular expertise. The point here is that the existing teacher leadership research literature illustrates the importance of collecting and reporting evidence regarding the methods of teacher leadership, in addition to the interdependent dimensions of objective, support and source of legitimacy.

The four dimensions are not independent, but influence one another in important ways. When Baker-Doyle and Gustavson (2016) studied teacher leadership in support of “transgressive teaching” (Hooks, 1994), the teachers they studied focused on addressing student needs even when such focus was contrary to administrative objectives. This study focused on methods of “permission seeking” that teachers not only employed to create relationships in support of objectives, but also to establish sources of support and to create legitimacy for the work of leadership that was inherently risky. This is an example of how the four dimensions of legitimacy, support, objectives and method interact, rather than stand apart from each other.

Gigante and Firestone’s (2008) study of “Administrative Support and Teacher Leadership in Schools Implementing Reform” provides another example of the value of looking not only at the four dimensions of teacher leadership, but also at interactions among them. In this study, all of the teacher leaders were focused on a common objective of strengthening institutional supports for inquiry-oriented instruction in mathematics and science. The cross-case analysis in the study sought to explore the interaction between legitimacy due to content expertise and administrative supports in the form of release time. One of the important findings of the study was that different configurations of expertise and support were related differentially to methods that either supported other teachers or helped them develop new capacity. In terms of the present paper, the important point is that it is only by probing beneath the umbrella of teacher leadership, beyond the formal/informal distinction, were Gigante and Firestone able to provide insight into how and why this manifestation of teacher leadership worked and achieved its objectives.

**Significance**

Teacher leadership is expanding as a topic of interest in the education community. Teachers imagine they might be able to make a difference beyond their own classrooms or have a true voice in shaping their profession. Principals hope to solicit help in managing the ever-increasing demands that seem to come at them from every direction: students, families, teachers, district leaders, the state and even society. District and state leaders expect the prospect of teacher leadership will help to attract strong candidates to the profession and help them want to stay. Some of these outcomes may be possible under certain conditions, but the ambiguity surrounding “teacher leadership” makes such progress difficult. The ambiguity undercuts the ability to apply past research to current questions, to build upon one another’s work and begin to establish an empirical knowledge base capable of maximizing the impact of teacher leadership.

The imperative for a framework for clarifying the concept of teacher leadership has become increasingly urgent today as teacher leadership initiatives and the research on them are scaling up. For decades, individual teachers, schools, districts or partner organizations have created their own experiments with teacher leadership. Research studies have consisted largely of case studies of individual teachers or schools or qualitative studies with small sample sizes. For example, they described one teachers’
experience, drew conclusions across a half-dozen interviews, or examined self-reports from a program’s participants. These studies have been important for theory-building, but now as districts institutionalize roles, states begin offering teacher leadership endorsements, and national organizations are expanding teacher–leader networks, we need more than theory-building. We need to move into empirical testing of those theories and figuring out what works. To accomplish this, we cannot continue to aggregate the many different concepts that fall under the umbrella of “teacher leadership.” We need to develop conventions for distinguishing among them.

Drawing upon Blumer's requirements for an empirically-useful concept, this paper offers conjectures that might help researchers and practitioners to state clearly what they mean by “teacher leadership,” distinguish between different uses of the umbrella term “teacher leadership,” and, in so doing, strengthen the ability to develop a cumulative body of knowledge about teacher leadership. We have proposed that scholars using the term teacher leadership specify legitimacy, support, objective and method in order to clearly identify what teacher leadership means in the context of their particular study. It is our belief that defining the term “teacher leadership” through these dimensions will enable fruitful comparisons across studies thereby addressing Blumer’s third requirement: It will enable research on teacher leadership to accumulate in productive ways and lead to much-needed theory-building in this field.

References


Further reading

About the authors

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Bill Zoellick works with schools, teachers and communities to provide students with the opportunity to engage in science that is authentic, useful and connected to the places where they live. Teacher leaders are central to this work.

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