Review of contemporary research on middle and teacher leaders

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Factors that affect middle or teacher leaders capacity to influence their environment

This section reports on both enablers and barriers to teacher leaders' capacity to influence their environment, while recognizing that constraints are often a mirror image of enablers.[1] As discussed in the previous sections, there is strong empirical evidence that teacher leaders need a range of **personal characteristics** and a degree of **role clarity** if they are to effectively influence.

Margolis (2012) found that teachers were more likely to accept teacher leaders and encourage them to be successful in their roles when they took a more 'humble approach'.[2] If teacher leaders were perceived as judgemental, particularly in relation to classroom visits or observations, a 'seemingly fragile trust was broken that led to teachers largely rejecting or avoiding the teacher leader'.[3] Margolis' study identified that the following teacher leader characteristics were identified as contributing to teachers becoming more open to learning:

- sharing;
- being hard working;
- encouraging and noticing that teachers themselves were working hard.

Teachers also engaged more when teacher leaders framed new teaching approaches as 'flexible' and 'adaptable' rather than the 'right way to teach', and when teacher leaders were willing to share examples of their own students' work and invite others to collaboratively analyse in light of new reforms.[4]

Margolis (2012) also found that the potential of teacher leaders to impact their colleagues' professional learning was reduced when there was role confusion, mismanagement of time and tenuous relationships.[5] He also found that teachers were more likely to accept or reject the 'role' than reject the characteristics of the individuals concerned.

Curtis (2013) identified some of the specific issues concerning role clarity, finding that the creation of new teacher leader roles was not always strategic or well designed because:

> ...school systems tend to graft new teacher leadership roles and

[1] O'Rourke and Burrows, 'Research on Cluster and School

[2] J. Margolis, 'What Do Today's Teachers Want (and Not Want) from Teacher Leaders?', (2013). P.3.

[3] Ibid. p.9.
[4] Ibid. p.11.
[5] Margolis, 'Hybrid Teacher Leaders and the New Professional Development Ecology.', (p. 291-315).

compensation strategies onto old systems in ways that fall far short of meaningful transformation and are unsustainable in the long term…Systems must define the processes that are most critical to student learning and then design teacher leadership in service of them, rather than defining teacher leadership roles first then figuring out how they can support the most important work.[6]

Two additional factors stand out across the empirical evidence base as significant enablers or barriers to realizing the power and potential of teacher leaders to contribute to student success:

- The understanding, support and actions of the principal;

- The culture and context within which teacher leaders work.

1.1 *The understanding, support and actions of the Principal*

The principal has been identified as a crucial enabler of the work of teacher leaders in schools, with one study of effective schools finding that teacher leadership never flourished independently of the principal.[7] O'Rourke and Burrows (2010a), analyzed enabling and constraining factors on the basis of input from over 400 teacher leaders. Principal factors were the most commonly cited, with the efforts and

efficacy of teacher leaders varying depending on principal attention to the following:

- The nature of the shared vision and aspirations crafted for learners – and how well educative purpose linked to priorities and rationales for action;

- How principals demonstrated and developed themselves as inquiry-minded, reflective, evidence informed professionals who strived for excellence in contemporary teaching, learning and leadership;

- The extent to which a learning culture and ethos existed in the school – with leaders actively fostering cultures of trust and openness, genuine collaboration to seek understanding, and mobilisation of individuals' commitment and initiative;

- The degree to which overall school approaches to professional learning were meta-strategic, coherent and aligned in focus, purpose and function;

- The degree to which organisation, structures, time and resourcing - the 'learning architecture' – had been established to enable deep professional learning and capacity building to occur in job-embedded ways;

- The degree to which working together in teams and as a learning community was valued with norms of inquiry, questioning, critique, protocols, feedback and analysis of practice and evidence;

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[6] Curtis, 'Finding a New Way: Leveraging Teacher Leadership to Meet Unprecedented Demands'. (p. iii).
[7] Akert and Martin, 'The Role of Teacher Leaders in School Improvement through the Perceptions of Principals and Teachers.', (p. 97).

- The level of role clarity, leadership development and capacity building opportunities for teacher leaders as they transitioned into new roles where they were likely to feel like novice learners.[8]

Research by Portin et al (2009) identified principals and senior leaders as playing a crucial role in clarifying, legitimizing and supporting the work and role of teacher leaders.[9] They also found that close collaboration between principals and teacher leaders contributed to the achievement of strong empirical outcomes for students and that the context created by school leaders critically shaped teacher leaders' work.[10] In the most successful schools, teacher leaders met weekly with senior leaders and principals and worked in partnership to design and plan professional learning for teachers.

The Portin study identified three other areas of concentrated effort by principals and senior school leaders, which were found to lay the groundwork for effective teacher leadership and team-based learning improvements:

- Clarifying learning improvement priorities – this helped teacher leaders to focus their work;
- Building team-oriented cultures – which contributed to the receptivity of teachers and their willingness to engage with teacher leaders;

- Anchoring improvement work to data – which de-personalised and focused professional inquiry.[11]

Teacher leaders were better positioned to understand the implications of, and translate broader policies or agendas into everyday teaching practices when they were included in shaping and absorbing the school wide learning improvement agendas.[12] This was also found to increase their motivation, capability and contributions.[13]

Crowther, Fergusson and Hann (2009) were the first to offer the concept of parallel leadership as a result of their research in the IDEAS project in Australia. This contrasts with positioning teacher leaders as on the path to becoming principals or more hierarchical conceptions of the role. They define parallel leadership as being underpinned by three distinctive qualities: (i) mutualism; (ii) a sense of shared purpose; and (iii) allowance for individual expression.[14] They found that in effective schools, the strategic role of the principal and the pedagogical expertise of key teacher leaders were regarded as 'equally important, effective, and dependable in shaping and implementing an ambitious innovation'.[15]

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[8] M. O'Rourke and P. Burrows, 'Research on Cluster and School Based Professional Learning 2006-2010: The Role of School Leaders', (2010a). p. 19.
[9] Portin et al., 'Leadership for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools'.
[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid. p. v.
[12] Ibid. P. vii. Burrows and O'Rourke, 'Succesful Literacy Coaching in Secondary Contexts', Ng, 'How School Middle Leaders in Singapore Understand and Practise 'Innovation in Education'.', (p. 253-262)
[13] Portin et al., 'Leadership for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools'.
[14] Crowther, Ferguson, and Hann, *Developing Teacher Leaders: How Teacher Leadership Enhances School Success*. P. 54.
[15] Ibid. p. 55.

This study identified seven challenges for principals if they are to enable teacher leadership:

1. Communicate strategic intent;
2. Incorporate the aspirations and views of others;
3. Pose difficult to answer questions;
4. Make space for individual innovation;
5. Know when to step back;
6. Create opportunities from perceived difficulties;
7. Build on achievement to create a culture of success.[16]

Akert and Martin (2012) identified a number of problems that could arise if principals and teacher leaders weren't collaborating effectively: power struggles emerged when the goals of teacher leaders and principals didn't align; tensions arose if principals didn't rethink their own roles as they built teacher leadership capacity – particularly in relation to sharing power and control; and the capacity of teacher leaders was dependent upon principals engaging in 'intentional actions' to create the necessary organizational culture and infrastructure required for effectiveness.[17] They concluded that principals needed to:

- Understand and value the importance of teacher leadership positions, and continually strive to communicate with these emerging leaders to enhance their role;

- Promote and clarify the work of teacher leadership and ensure that teacher leader voices and input were heard and valued;

- Establish structures within the school to facilitate teacher dialogue and critical conversations as a significant means for developing school goals and visions;

- Create a school culture that enabled teacher leaders to be more involved in decisions and activities that directly affected the process of school improvement;

- Create the conditions that enabled teacher leaders to offer their skill sets to influence others;

- Actively foster the development of leadership capacity within their teachers and find out why teachers might be discouraged from stepping up into leadership roles;

- Acknowledge time demands and create structures during the school day for teacher leaders to fulfil their responsibilities.[18]

The importance of principals creating structures that enabled both teachers and teacher leaders to come together to learn has been identified in multiple studies – without attending to this need, the potential contribution of teacher leaders to

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[16] Ibid. p. 80-87.
[17] Akert and Martin, 'The Role of Teacher Leaders in School Improvement through the Perceptions of Principals and Teachers.', (International Journal of Education, 2012).

[18] Ibid. p. 295-297.

work effectively with their colleagues is severely curtailed.[19]

Principals' lack of understanding of the power and potential of teacher leaders to initiate and facilitate change, or feeling threatened by teacher leader expertise has also been identified as a barrier to efficacy.[20] Angell and DeHart (2011) found that that while many teachers have the desire and motivation to lead, they didn't always have the opportunities, concluding that principals need to understand what teacher leadership looks like *beyond* the classroom.[21]

Sometimes a principal assumption was made that because a teacher was a highly capable classroom practitioner, they could move smoothly into the role of teacher leader.[22] Teacher leaders have reported that they experienced levels of anxiety and uncertainty when they first moved into these new leadership roles – somewhat like being a graduate again despite being very experienced classroom teachers.[23]

Teacher leaders report being under-utilized or restricted, either due to principals not accurately assessing their capabilities or being unwilling to

share power, authority or leadership responsibilities.[24] More effective principals reflected on and adjusted their own roles and ways of working as they built teacher leader capacity.[25] They also discriminated between the roles of senior leaders (who help them manage overall school operations and who share supervisory duties) and teacher leaders who lead improvements in teaching and learning.[26] Roles were less ambiguous and more focused in these schools, yet teacher leaders still had flexibility and agency.

Principals who effectively built or enabled teacher leadership capacity were open to new learning for themselves, particularly in relation to how best to cultivate teacher leaders and build such capacity across their schools.[27] They found that they needed to hold back and allow teacher leaders into the leadership space, with commensurate authority to make decisions and to act.[28] Overwhelmingly, these principals were committed to positioning teacher leaders where they could be most effective and also understood that they needed to enable them to engage in

[19] See also Portin et al., 'Leadership for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools', Gurr and Drysdale, 'Middle-Level Secondary School Leaders: Potential, Constraints and Implications for Leadership Preparation and Development', (
[20] Margolis and Huggins, 'Distributed but Undefined: New Teacher Leader Roles to Change Schools.', , Crowther, Ferguson, and Hann, *Developing Teacher Leaders: How Teacher Leadership Enhances School Success*.
[21] Angell and DeHart, 'Teacher Perceptions of Teacher Leadership: Examining Differences by Experience, Degree, and Position', (NASSP Bulletin, 2011)
[22] O'Rourke and Burrows, 'Research on Cluster and School Based Professional Learning 2006-2010: The Role of School Leaders'.
[23] Ibid.

[24] O'Rourke and Burrows, 'Research on Cluster and School Based Professional Learning 2006-2010: The Role of Teacher Leaders', Margolis and Huggins, 'Distributed but Undefined: New Teacher Leader Roles to Change Schools.', (Journal of School Leadership, 2012)
[25] Akert and Martin, 'The Role of Teacher Leaders in School Improvement through the Perceptions of Principals and Teachers.', (International Journal of Education, 2012)
[26] Portin et al., 'Leadership for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools'.
[27] Akert and Martin, 'The Role of Teacher Leaders in School Improvement through the Perceptions of Principals and Teachers.', , O'Rourke and Burrows, 'Research on Cluster and School Based Professional Learning 2006-2010: The Role of Teacher Leaders', O'Rourke and Burrows, 'Research on Cluster and School Based Professional Learning 2006-2010: The Role of School Leaders'.
[28] Curtis, 'Finding a New Way: Leveraging Teacher Leadership to Meet Unprecedented Demands'.

their own, ongoing professional learning.[29] They valued and understood teacher leaders as translators of school, region or system initiatives and connectors of people and learning across the school.[30] They were also able to envision new ways of working together.[31]

1.2 The culture and context within which they worked, including how they were perceived by colleagues

Culture and context have been identified as critical factors affecting teacher leadership in schools.[32] Margolis (2013) identified the following social and political barriers 'engrained within school cultures' as stifling the role of teacher leadership: an underlying ethic of individualism and egalitarianism; perceptions that teacher leaders are the mouthpieces of the administration; a wider skepticism of any 'outsider' advocating for new approaches to teaching; ill-defined roles that undermine teacher relationships; and the idea that teachers are only working when they are leading children, not adults.[33]

Teacher leaders in Singapore identified two aspects of culture in their system that were inhibiting their change efforts. As they worked to encourage teachers to develop as reflective practitioners, they found that this was inhibited by a system that was 'too structured' and where people positioned 'above' teachers and teacher leaders do the thinking on their behalf.[34] These teacher leaders found that they were confronted with teachers who were reluctant to take the risks associated with innovations and attributed this to a system culture that valued success and frowned upon failure. They also had recommendations for their school leaders to slow down, stop rushing into action and provide teachers with time, encouragement and support to understand and think through the consequences of proposed innovations.[35]

Logistical factors, such as the time and resources necessary to carry out the role, were identified in multiple studies.[36] Time demands could act as a deterrent to people stepping up into teacher leader roles, or a constraining factor for those willing and keen to do more but unable to do justice to both classroom teaching and leadership

[29] O'Rourke and Burrows, 'Research on Cluster and School Based Professional Learning 2006-2010: The Role of School Leaders', A. Lieberman and L. Friedrich, 'How Teachers Learn to Lead: A Study of 31 Teacher Leaders', (2010).
[30] Ng, 'The Development of School Middle Leaders in Singapore: The Management and Leadership in Schools Program.', (Asian Journal of Educational Research and Synergy, 2009).
[31] Portin et al., 'Leadership for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools'.
[32] Lieberman and Miller, 'Teacher Leadship'. Ng, 'How School Middle Leaders in Singapore Understand and Practise 'Innovation in Education'.', , Akert and Martin, 'The Role of Teacher Leaders in School Improvement through the Perceptions of Principals and Teachers.', , O'Rourke and Burrows, 'Research on Cluster and School Based Professional Learning 2006-2010: The Role of Teacher Leaders', Portin et al., 'Leadership for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools'.
[33] Margolis, 'What Do Today's Teachers Want (and Not Want) from Teacher Leaders?'. p. 3.

[34] Ng, 'How School Middle Leaders in Singapore Understand and Practise 'Innovation in Education'.', (p. 258)
[35] Ibid. p. 259.
[36] Akert and Martin, 'The Role of Teacher Leaders in School Improvement through the Perceptions of Principals and Teachers.', , M. O'Rourke and P. Burrows, 'Research on Cluster and School Based Professional Learning 2006-2010: Transforming the Way Teachers Learn.', (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2010b), Margolis and Doring, 'The Fundamental Dilemma of Teacher Leader-Facilitated Professional Development: Do as I (Kind of) Say, Not as I (Sort of) Do', , Gurr and Drysdale, 'Middle-Level Secondary School Leaders: Potential, Constraints and Implications for Leadership Preparation and Development', (Journal of Educational Administration, 2013).

responsibilities.[37] Challenges were also created for teacher leaders by external factors, such as the rapid pace of policy change or major changes in curriculum.[38]

Teacher leaders could be enabled (or restrained) by culture and structures but they also actively contributed to strengthening and moving existing cultures as they went about their work. In learning cultures identified as enabling 'transformations' in practice, leaders at multiple levels worked together to support and enable their colleagues to inquire into practice, consider evidence and engage in substantive discussions to determine how best to act in the best interests of students.[39] In these schools, there was a conscious effort to create new roles and structures that enabled teachers to spend more time in each others' classrooms and to come together to learn.

Professional learning cultures that limited or constrained the work of teacher leaders have been identified as:

- those with an over reliance on external experts to lead the way and provide advice, particularly when teacher leaders had the necessary skills and capabilities to initiate or lead learning;

- an emphasis on 'getting it right' or 'doing it right' which positioned teachers as technicians; and
- where professional learning offerings were a grab bag of opportunities that individuals opted in or out of depending on their interests and motivations and which were not necessarily connected strategically to school wide priorities.[40]

When strategic priorities were clear, teacher leaders and teachers could be offered more scope for autonomy in working out how best to achieve such priorities, with this subsequently contributing to increasing professionalism.[41] Importantly, these priorities needed to be student focused and framed as high aspirations, so that even the most experienced leaders and teachers were challenged to learn.[42] When school based priorities were linked to system goals for learning, they provided opportunities for broader based collaborations and investigations with colleagues in other schools.[43]

The contexts and cultures that best enabled teacher leaders were characterized by social norms that valued participation and inquiry, productive collaboration and reflection, evidence informed risk taking for improvement and innovation, and ongoing, school based professional learning by all. Provided they were

[37] O'Rourke and Burrows, 'Research on Cluster and School Based Professional Learning 2006-2010: Transforming the Way Teachers Learn.', Akert and Martin, 'The Role of Teacher Leaders in School Improvement through the Perceptions of Principals and Teachers.', (International Journal of Education, 2012).
[38] Earley et al., *Review of the School Leadership Landscape*.
[39] O'Rourke and Burrows, 'Research on Cluster and School Based Professional Learning 2006-2010: Transforming the Way Teachers Learn.'.

[40] Ibid.
[41] Crowther, Ferguson, and Hann, *Developing Teacher Leaders: How Teacher Leadership Enhances School Success*.
[42] A. Hargreaves and D. Shirley, *The Fourth Way: The Inspiring Future of Educational Change.* (Thousand Oaks, CA.: Corwin Press, 2009).
[43] A. Harris and M. Jones, 'Professional Learning Communities and System Improvement', *Improving Schools,* 13/2 (2010), 172-81.

supported, understood and had a compatible vision with the principal, teacher leaders were able to make a contribution to developing more sophisticated professional learning cultures, spanning the building of technical knowledge and know-how, sharing and dissemination, collaboration, dialogue, reflection and research.[44]

These cultures, in turn, affected teachers and their openness and dispositions to learn. Krovetz and Arriaza (2006) found that when staff conversation was about 'evidence, cause and effect, hypothesizing, reflection, and passion' it crossed curriculum barriers and encouraged richer conversations.[45] Portin et al. (2009) found that the accessibility of peer-alike colleagues was particularly significant in enabling teacher leaders to better mitigate the tensions they experienced in emergent teacher leader roles.[46] In successful schools, coaching was often one aspect of a sophisticated range of professional learning opportunities available to staff, supported by an effective learning architecture which offered teachers a range of different entry points and depth of engagement matched to their readiness to learn.[47]

In summary, both organizational and personal factors enabled or constrained teacher leaders and their capacity to influence. Organizational factors included:

- degrees of role clarity or ambiguity and the achievement of a balance that enabled innovation;
- the level of aspiration associated with the expectations of teacher leaders so that they weren't underutilized;
- the level of support, understanding and engagement in overall school improvement strategies offered by principals and senior leaders;
- the willingness of principals to rethink their own leadership roles in light of teacher leadership capacity in the school and to share power;
- the extent that team oriented professional learning cultures were established across the school; and
- the adequacy of the available time and structures to work collaboratively with their colleagues.

Personal factors were in reference to both teacher leaders and those they worked with. The extent to which teacher leaders saw themselves as leaders, their understanding of how to influence colleagues, and whether or not they sought to continuously learn and improve themselves, were particularly significant factors. When the colleagues they worked with brought a positive disposition towards inquiry and new learning, reflection and experimentation, they were far more likely to make the most of opportunities to work and learn with teacher leaders.[48]

[44] O'Rourke and Burrows, 'Research on Cluster and School Based Professional Learning 2006-2010: Transforming the Way Teachers Learn.'.

[45] M. Krovetz and G. Arriaza, *Collaborative Teacher Leadership* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2006).

[46] Portin et al., 'Leadership for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools'.

[47] Burrows and O'Rourke, 'Succesful Literacy Coaching in Secondary Contexts'.

[48] Portin et al., 'Leadership for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools', O'Rourke and Burrows, 'Research on Cluster

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