Informal Teacher Leadership in Action: Indicators and Illustrations

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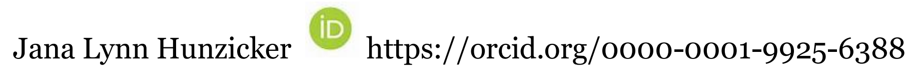
Jana Lynn Hunzicker  https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9925-6388

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Abstract

What is teacher leadership, and what does it look like in action? Part of a qualitative study to better understand how teachers learn to exercise leadership, this article illustrates indicators of informal teacher leadership through the lived experiences of eight practicing elementary and middle school teachers. Characterizing informal teacher leadership as student-centered, action-oriented, and positively influential on teaching and learning beyond one's own classroom, the article illustrates informal teacher leadership through student advocacy and school-level leadership roles and responsibilities. Motivated by student-focused concerns, teachers in the study positioned themselves for informal teacher leadership intentionally and unintentionally. Through their experiences, some teachers grew professionally and built leadership self-efficacy. The article illustrates that a student-centered, action-oriented approach to teaching establishes a foundation for informal teacher leadership, but positive influence on teaching and learning beyond one's own classroom distinguishes informal teacher leadership from simply teacher professionalism.

Key words: Danielson's framework for teaching, hermeneutic phenomenology, multiple case study, qualitative research, student advocacy, school-level leadership, self-efficacy, teacher leadership, teacher professionalism

Informal Teacher Leadership in Action: Indicators and Illustrations

"Part of [teacher leadership] comes from being given the opportunity to exercise leadership skills. The other comes from willingness to step up and become a teacher leader. Opportunities might be available, but if a teacher is not willing to become a leader, he/she never will."

~ Larry, seventh grade math and literature teacher

Teacher leadership means different things to different people. For some, teacher leadership means directing a program, chairing a committee, or speaking at school events. For others it means mentoring new teachers, sharing instructional materials, or providing professional development. Although many definitions and descriptions of teacher leadership exist, no single conception is widely agreed upon (Frost, 2003; Poekert, 2012). We know it when we see it but cannot always articulate what we see.

Teacher leadership can be formal or informal. Formal teacher leaders work full time outside their classrooms, directly with their colleagues, to support changes in teaching practice (Lord, Cress, & Miller, 2008; Manno & Firestone, 2008). Informal teacher leaders teach full time and accept school- and district-wide leadership responsibilities in addition to their assigned teaching duties (Danielson, 2006; Watt, Huerta, & Mills, 2009).

Whether formal or informal, teacher leadership is characterized by teachers working together on behalf of students. Silva, Gimbert, and Nolan (2000) describe teacher leadership as "ultimately based on doing what is right by children" (p. 799). Lieberman and Friedrich (2007) describe it as "working collaboratively" and "making a commitment to students" (p. 44). Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) write that teacher leaders "identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders" (p. 6). York-Barr and Duke (2004) add that teacher

leaders collaborate “to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement” (p. 287-288).

These descriptions portray teacher leadership as student-centered and action-oriented, yet as professionals all teachers – not just teacher leaders – are expected to participate in collaborative, instructionally-focused work. Importantly, the descriptions further clarify that teacher leadership surpasses teacher professionalism through positive influence on teaching and learning beyond the classroom. In other words, a foundation for teacher leadership is established when teachers accept leadership responsibility through student-centered actions. Teacher leadership is realized when a teacher’s efforts positively influence teaching and learning grade- or team-wide, schoolwide, or district-wide (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Lieberman and Friedrich (2007) write that teacher leaders “take responsibility for contributing beyond their own classrooms” (p. 44). Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) add that teacher leaders “accept responsibility for achieving the outcomes of their leadership” (p. 6). In Silva and colleagues’ (2000) study, teacher leaders positively influenced teaching and learning beyond their own classrooms by navigating school structures, nurturing relationships, modeling professional growth, helping others with change, and “challeng[ing] the status quo by raising children’s voices” (p. 793).

Based on these descriptions, teacher leadership is characterized as student-centered, action-oriented, and positively influential on teaching and learning beyond one’s own classroom. However, informal teacher leaders are “teachers first and leaders second” (Killion, 2011a, p. 12), often contributing to their schools and districts quietly and/or without recognition. As a result, informal teacher leadership has been called invisible (Donaldson, 2007; Killion, 2009; Urbanski & Nickolaou, 1997). Indeed, the work of informal teacher leaders may be under-documented.

One synthesis of research on teacher leadership revealed seven studies of formal teacher leadership, eight studies of informal teacher leadership, and 14 studies that did not distinguish between the two (Poekert, 2012). Because the majority of teacher leaders in the United States lead from the classroom (Xie & Shen, 2012), more research focusing exclusively on informal teacher leadership is needed. This article illustrates indicators of informal teacher leadership through the lived experiences of eight practicing elementary and middle school teachers.

Informal Teacher Leadership in Action

Various constructs of teacher leadership have been published over the past fifteen years. Some represent the contexts and processes of teacher leadership. According to Moller and Pankake (2006), teacher leadership consists of relationships, professional learning, and distributed power and authority. York-Barr and Duke (2004) describe conditions, such as support, resources, and development opportunities, which allow teacher leaders to improve their teaching practices toward increased student learning. Danielson (2006) identifies schoolwide policies and programs, teaching and learning, communications/community relations, and school culture as areas of teacher leader influence. Each of these constructs reflects Spillane's (2006) conception of distributed teacher leadership, which is characterized by a concern for leadership practice and dynamic interactions between leaders, followers, and the situation. Other terms describing several teachers within a school taking responsibility for improving teaching and learning schoolwide include shared leadership (Wilhelm, 2013), collaborative and activist leadership (Cody, 2013), and teacher-led schools (Nazareno, 2013).

Other constructs describe what teacher leaders do. York-Barr and Duke (2004) classify teacher leaders' work into seven categories: coordination/management, curriculum work, professional development, school improvement, parent/community involvement, contributions to

the profession, and pre-service teacher education. The Teacher Leader Model Standards (Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium [TLEC], 2011) present seven domains of teacher leadership: fostering a collaborative culture to support educator development and student learning, accessing and using research to improve practice and student learning, promoting professional learning for continuous improvement, facilitating improvements in instruction and student learning, promoting the use of assessments and data for school and district improvement, improving outreach and collaboration with families and community, and advocating for student learning and the profession. These constructs convey abstract descriptions of what teacher leaders do, but what does "leading from the classroom" look like in action?

Danielson's (2007) framework for teaching, an operational rubric that describes teaching practice across four levels of performance, provides precise descriptors of informal teacher leadership. The framework is organized into four domains: planning and preparation, the classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibilities. Together, the domains provide a classroom-based context for informal teacher leadership by integrating informal teacher leadership practices into the "whole" of teaching. Within the fourth domain, professional responsibilities, three components of teaching practice precisely describe the actions of informal teacher leadership: 4d-participating in a professional community, 4e-growing and developing professionally, and 4f-showing professionalism. Each component contains three to five elements that elaborate its features (see Figure 1). Although not included here, 10- to 40-word descriptors delineate each element across each level of performance. In this way, three of the four levels of performance (excluding the unsatisfactory level) represent the developmental range of teacher professionalism to informal teacher leadership. For the purposes of this analysis, descriptors at the basic level of performance represent teacher professionalism but not teacher leadership.

Descriptors at the proficient level indicate partial and/or developing teacher leadership. Descriptors at the distinguished level indicate informal teacher leadership that is student-centered, action-oriented, and positively influential on teaching and learning beyond one's own classroom.

4d. Participating in a Professional Community
- Relationships with colleagues
- Involvement in a culture of professional inquiry
- Service to the school
- Participation in school and district projects

4e. Growing and Developing Professionally
- Enhancement of content knowledge and pedagogical skill
- Receptivity to feedback from colleagues
- Service to the profession

4f. Showing professionalism
- Integrity and ethical conduct
- Service to students
- Advocacy
- Decision making
- Compliance with school and district regulations

Figure 1: Informal Teacher Leadership Components and Elements (Danielson, 2007, p. 4)

Using components 4d, 4e, and 4f as a starting point, this article illustrates indicators of informal teacher leadership through the lived experiences of eight practicing elementary and middle school teachers. Characterizing informal teacher leadership as student-centered, action-oriented, and positively influential on teaching and learning beyond one's own classroom, the article illustrates informal teacher leadership through student advocacy and school-level leadership roles and responsibilities.

Research Methods

The research design combined multiple case study with hermeneutic phenomenological analysis, which explores the lived experiences of individuals and the meanings they construct about their experiences (Laverty, 2003; Loftus & Higgs, 2010). Hermeneutic phenomenology

honors the interpretations of both research participants and researcher (Creswell, 2007; Laverty, 2003; Schwandt, 2000). Case study allows for deep exploration of a human experience, in this case informal teacher leadership (Stake, 2000). Together, hermeneutic phenomenological analysis and multiple case study facilitated deep and broad exploration of informal teacher leadership by analyzing individual teachers' descriptions and interpretations of their experiences across a variety of perspectives (Kvale, 1996; Stake, 2000).

Research Participants

Ten practicing, elementary and middle school teachers enrolled in a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) education master's cohort at a private, Midwestern university were invited to participate in the study. At the time the study began, the cohort had been together over two years, and most members were within two months of graduation. Twenty teachers were enrolled in the cohort. All twenty were considered emerging teacher leaders because 1) state requirements for the teacher leader endorsement were built in to the STEM education master's program, 2) all had been encouraged to pursue teacher leadership roles and responsibilities throughout the program, and 3) all had recently completed the program's advanced teacher leadership course. The ten teachers invited to participate in the study met one additional criterion: Each had earned a score of 100% on their culminating teacher leadership project, entitled Teacher Leader Portfolio (TLP). The project required teachers to document and reflect on their professional growth as informal teacher leaders during their time in the STEM education master's program.

Eight of the ten invited teachers chose to participate in the study. All were white, non-Hispanic. Seven were female; one was male. Three were in their late 20s, four were in their early to mid-30s, and one was age 60. All held bachelor's degrees in various content areas including

elementary education, special education, early childhood education, mathematics/science, and history. In addition, two held a middle school endorsement, and one held two bachelor's degrees plus a master's degree in special education.

At the time of the study, two of the eight participating teachers taught in Spring Lake District 507, a suburban, P-8 school district. Six taught in Welchester District 62, a large, urban P-12 school district. Their teaching assignments ranged from early childhood through ninth grade, and their years of teaching experience spanned five to 14 years (see Figure 2).

Teacher	Grade/Content Area	Years of Teaching Experience	School District
Larry	seventh grade math and literature	5	Spring Lake District 507
Michelle	sixth grade math	6	
Debbie	fourth grade special education	6	Welchester District 62
Marie	fourth grade	9	
Angela	third grade and lead teacher	11	
Rose	ninth grade special education	11	
Anne	early childhood inclusion	11	
Doris	first grade	14	

Figure 2: Research Participants' Teaching Placements and Years of Experience

Teacher Leader Portfolio (TLP)

The TLP was the culminating project for the advanced teacher leadership course. Its purpose was to engage teachers in self-assessment and reflection of their professional growth toward teacher leadership since beginning the STEM education master's program. Teachers were required to compile artifacts that demonstrated pre/post evidence of professional growth for components 4d, 4e, and 4f of Danielson's (2007) framework for teaching (see Figure 1). In addition to providing at least one artifact for each component, teachers were required to rate their performance (using a rubric adapted from the framework) and compose a written self-reflection

that presented an evidence-based self-analysis of their growth as teacher leaders. Participants' written self-reflections ranged 10 to 21 pages.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection involved participating teacher self-reports. Via e-mail, participants completed a brief questionnaire (see Appendix A) and provided the researcher with an electronic copy of their TLP written self-reflection. To ensure that participants' interpretations took precedence over the researcher's, pre/post artifacts and teacher self-assessments (via the adapted rubric) were not collected. Questionnaire responses focusing on demographics and professional background (questions 1-7) were compiled into a matrix to describe individual and group characteristics. Responses to questions 8-12 supplemented participants' written self-reflections.

Data analysis was guided by the following question: What does informal teacher leadership look like in action? Participants' written self-reflections and questionnaire responses were initially coded to Danielson's (2007) framework for teaching components 4d, 4e, and 4f and their elements (see Figure 1), with particular focus on the proficient and distinguished levels of performance. Later, open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and constant comparative analysis (Glaser, 1965) were employed to identify and refine common themes through ongoing synthesis and elaboration (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). Both common and individual experiences were reported, and direct quotations were preserved when possible. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to research participants, their schools, and their school districts. The findings were presented to research participants via focus group, and their affirmations, elaborations, and critiques were integrated with the researcher's to create a final interpretation (Morse & Richards, 2002). Four of the eight research participants attended. Finally, a composite description was constructed and compared to current literature on teacher leadership. Due to the

richness of the data collected, the study's findings were reported across three manuscripts (Hunzicker, 2012, 2013, 2014).

Findings and Discussion

Teachers in the study demonstrated informal teacher leadership through student advocacy and school-level leadership roles and responsibilities that positively influenced teaching and learning beyond their own classrooms.

Student Advocacy

Teachers demonstrated student advocacy when they interceded on behalf of students in their own or others' classrooms beyond the scope of their contracted professional duties. In particular, student advocacy took the form of speaking out. Three teachers demonstrated informal teacher leadership when they spoke out on behalf of students in their own and others' classrooms and positively influenced teaching and learning school, district-, and statewide.

Modifying a school policy. Rose recalled a time when she spoke out on behalf of ninth grade special education students at Parker Middle and High School (PMHS):

> I was concerned about the number of IEP [individualized education plan] students with D/Fs in world history. This class does not have co-teachers or aides to help instruction, so it seems to be a hard subject for our special education population. I did not believe it was fair that some IEP students were not allowed to go on a field trip because they had D/Fs, so I emailed my academy leader to voice my opinion.

In response to Rose's concern, PMHS modified the ninth grade curriculum the following year. Students functioning below grade level in reading and math were no longer required to take world history. Instead, they took a strategic reading class to prepare for freshman English. A similar class was made available to address struggling students' math needs. Rose concluded,

"Our students now take classes to help them develop their reading and math skills rather than tackle world history."

Rose's approach was student-centered because she recognized that the ninth grade curriculum was unjustly affecting some students in her school, and she took action by notifying her immediate supervisor about the problem. Although Rose's account does not tell what happened next, changes were made in the ninth grade course requirements to ensure a more developmentally appropriate curriculum. By speaking out via e-mail, Rose demonstrated informal teacher leadership that positively influenced PMHS's ninth grade curriculum as well as the learning experiences of ninth grade students with IEPs.

Adding an instructional program. Debbie advocated for a fourth grade special education student by seeking instructional resources, an effort that positively influenced teaching and learning district-wide. She explained:

> Last year, a Mexican student was placed on my special education caseload. A few days before school, my principal told me that this student spoke no English. I was extremely nervous about how to reach [him]. I immediately began online research and spoke with our bilingual teacher about how to best meet his needs.

Debbie was persistent in advocating for the student. She explained how her advocacy efforts continued throughout the school year:

> I began instructing him with picture vocabulary cards and picture books. I was impressed that he was making gains but felt the English-only services did not adequately fulfill his learning deficits. I felt that he would benefit more from a teacher who could speak Spanish. I spoke with my school principal and special education coordinator about the possibility of getting a bilingual aide to assist him, but there was no funding available.

> Over the course of the school year, I had many discussions with the special services coordinator advocating for a bilingual special education classroom in our district. Toward the end of the school year, she informed me that she had spoken with the director of special education about it, and the director was looking into options. I am optimistic that this service will be available in the near future.

Debbie's approach to seeking instructional resources was student-centered because she understood her student's need for both special education and bilingual services. She took action by researching online, consulting with her district's bilingual teacher, and providing classroom instruction designed for the student's specific needs. Debbie's actions progressed to informal teacher leadership as she engaged in multiple conversations with her principal and special education coordinator to advocate for a bilingual aide, and later for a bilingual special education classroom in the district. Although Debbie never spoke directly with the district's director of special education, her suggestion was received and under consideration at the time Debbie shared this experience. Through conversations with key administrators over the course of one academic year, Debbie demonstrated informal teacher leadership that was student-centered, action-oriented, and influential beyond her own classroom.

Influencing individuals to act. Anne, an early childhood inclusion teacher, advocated for students statewide by speaking out. She shared:

> My advocacy is currently focused on our state's economic crisis and the impact it is having on education. I subscribe to the Responsible Budget Coalition's web updates and continue to call legislators to voice my concerns. I have spoken to our local board of education as well as legislators at the state level, and I send home postcards with my students so their parents can become advocates as well.

Anne's approach was student-centered because she realized that cuts in state funding could limit instructional resources and negatively affect students' learning experiences. She took action by keeping herself informed about budgetary decision-making at the state level, contacting her state representatives and senators to advocate for educational programs, and encouraging the parents of her students to do the same. Anne demonstrated informal leadership through her phone calls to state legislators and postcards to parents. Although her reflection does not reveal the outcomes of her efforts, Anne was – at a minimum – positively influencing teaching and learning beyond her own classroom by raising the awareness of state legislators and parents regarding the importance of state funding for education.

Student Advocacy and Informal Teacher Leadership

In her framework for teaching, Danielson (2007) emphasizes teachers' actions on behalf of students as an important element of professionalism. At the proficient level of performance, service to students occurs when a teacher is "active in serving students" (p. 108). At the distinguished level, service to students is described as "highly proactive", which includes "seeking out resources when needed" (p. 108). According to Danielson's framework, advocacy is an extension of service to students. At the proficient level, teachers demonstrate advocacy when they "work to ensure that all students receive a fair opportunity to succeed" (p. 108). These student-centered actions describe teacher professionalism, but do not necessarily influence teaching and learning beyond one's own classroom.

At the distinguished level of Danielson's (2007) framework, teachers demonstrate informal teacher leadership through student advocacy when they "make a concerted effort to challenge negative attitudes or practices to ensure that all students, particularly those traditionally underserved, are honored in the school" (p. 108). Silva and colleagues (2000) add

that student advocacy is a defining characteristic of teacher leadership when it influences system wide change on behalf of students. Cody (2013) calls this "giving students a voice" (p. 69). Rose, Debbie, and Anne challenged negative attitudes or practices and raised children's voices by speaking out against the injustice of the D/Fs list, articulating the need for a bilingual special education classroom, and communicating the importance of educational funding to state legislators, school board members, and parents. Due to the positive influences of their actions schoolwide, district-wide, and statewide, these teachers demonstrated informal teacher leadership through student advocacy by speaking out.

Positioning through student advocacy. Even when student advocacy does not positively influence teaching and learning beyond the classroom, it positions teachers for leadership. For example, Anne shared her process for instructional planning, in which she advocated for students in her classroom but did not demonstrate informal teacher leadership. She traced her growth in this area from early in her teaching career:

> In the beginning, I addressed my students' needs by reading current articles and keeping up with all of the trends made available to me through my membership with the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). With time, I began to shift my advocacy efforts to specific students rather than just a whole group approach. Being involved with the CEC afforded numerous general advocacy opportunities, but my students still needed personalized attention. Now, I plan based on individual needs and try to extend my students' learning through outside resources.

Anne's approach to instructional planning was student-centered because she prioritized addressing individual needs in addition to simply covering the curriculum. She took action by joining a professional organization, reading current publications in her teaching field, and

strengthening her approach to instructional planning. Although, at the time of her writing, Anne's student-centered actions demonstrated student advocacy at the proficient level of performance, Anne did not demonstrate informal teacher leadership because her actions did not positively influence teaching and learning beyond her own classroom. However, her student advocacy through instructional planning positioned her to positively influence teaching and learning beyond her own classroom, and she did so in other areas of her teaching practice (as illustrated earlier). Moore and Berry (2010) support Anne's blend of teacher professionalism and informal teacher leadership, asserting that teachers who have demonstrated exemplary professional practices on behalf of students should have a voice in local, state, and national policy making.

By definition, student advocacy is student-centered and action-oriented (Danielson, 2007; Silva et al., 2000). Teachers who work directly with students are well-positioned for student advocacy because they recognize obstacles and envision solutions that school leaders may miss (Hickey & Harris, 2005). Although every student advocacy effort is not considered informal teacher leadership, student-centered, action-oriented efforts – which often begin with one's own students – establish a foundation for informal teacher leadership by positioning teachers to positively influence teaching and learning beyond their own classrooms.

School-level Leadership Roles and Responsibilities

In addition to student advocacy, teachers in the study positively influenced teaching and learning through school-level leadership roles and responsibilities beyond the scope of their contracted professional duties. School-level leadership roles and responsibilities involved promoting research-based practices and providing professional development for fellow teachers. As committee member, lead teacher, and peer coach, three teachers demonstrated informal

teacher leadership by positively influencing teaching and learning schoolwide and at the grade/team level.

Committee member. Michelle positively influenced teaching and learning through active participation on her school's scheduling committee. Alongside fellow committee members, she worked to persuade colleagues and administrators at Spring Lake Middle School to adopt a new master schedule. She shared:

> In order to gain a common planning time that was flexible for both grade-level teams and subject area partners, we decided that it would be necessary to extend the school day a bit. Many teachers expressed frustration about the idea because they enjoyed the relatively early dismissal time. Although there were differing viewpoints on the matter, we decided to make the decision based on what we felt was best for students in the long run.

Michelle and other members of her school's scheduling committee took a student-centered approach by creating a master schedule they felt would best support teaching and learning in their school. Throughout the academic year, during team meetings, faculty meetings, and informal conversations, they took action by promoting the instructional benefits of the schedule for both students and teachers. Committee members demonstrated informal teacher leadership by positively influencing teaching and learning schoolwide. In the spring, teachers and administrators at Spring Lake Middle School agreed to adopt the new master schedule, and it was implemented the following academic year.

Lead teacher. Angela positively influenced teaching and learning through her school-level role of lead teacher. As third grade lead teacher at Crestwood Primary School, Angela was responsible for providing professional development on strategic data analysis and goal setting for

her grade-level team. When Angela's principal saw her strength in this area, she asked Angela to lead teachers schoolwide through the process of longitudinal data analysis using Tungsten Benchmarks. Angela was also asked to present the school's data analysis at a board of education meeting. She reflected, "My involvement…opened up discussions and gave us another platform to begin making more deliberate decisions. For example, the data analysis led our grade-level teams to revisit curriculum mapping and pyramid planning based upon specific student needs."

Angela's approach to leading her grade-level team was student-centered because it focused on improving student achievement through data-based instructional planning. She took action by fulfilling her duty as lead teacher and accepting the additional responsibilities of leading schoolwide professional development and presenting the school's data analysis at a board of education meeting. Angela positively influenced teaching and learning within and across classrooms at Crestwood Primary School by showing teachers how to interpret and use student achievement data in tandem with the district's curriculum. She also modeled informal teacher leadership through peer coaching, peer-led professional development, and serving as a spokesperson for her school.

Peer coach. When she saw the need, Debbie volunteered to coach her school's fourth grade-level team in using a new reading intervention program. She recalled:

> Last year, 95 Percent Group was extended to fourth and fifth grades, but the teachers were only given one day of training. Since I had received training and used the intervention actively, I was able to assist the fourth grade team in data collecting, analyzing, and compiling meaningful groupings using the data. I also shared materials with the team and showed them how to effectively organize materials and instruction.

Debbie's approach was student-centered because she understood that fourth grade teachers' correct usage of 95 Percent Group would directly benefit students' reading achievement. She took action by volunteering and serving as a peer coach for the fourth grade-level team. Debbie positively influenced teaching and learning beyond her own fourth grade special education classroom by strengthening teachers' ability to use the new reading intervention program, which increased the likelihood that all fourth grade students on her grade-level team would receive appropriate reading interventions.

Positioning through School-level Leadership Roles and Responsibilities

By accepting school-level leadership roles and responsibilities, Michelle and Angela positioned themselves for informal teacher leadership. As a member of her school's scheduling committee, Michelle had the opportunity to promote research-based practices by creating a master schedule that included common planning time for both content area groups and interdisciplinary teams. As a lead teacher, Angela had the opportunity to positively influence student learning at her grade level, and later schoolwide, through peer-led professional development. While Michelle and Angela accepted school-level leadership roles and responsibilities, Debbie intentionally sought them. Volunteering to serve as 95 Percent Group coach for her grade level team is one example. Debbie also initiated other school-level leadership roles and responsibilities.

Realizing in her fourth year of teaching that she needed to position herself to positively influence teaching and learning beyond her own classroom, Debbie asserted her desire for more substantive school-level leadership. She recalled:

> In my first three years of teaching, the only committee I served on was the social committee. My primary responsibility, besides attending monthly meetings, was to plan

> staff socials. Although this was an opportunity to form relationships with colleagues, it did not challenge me to grow professionally. During my third year, I explained to my principal that I would like to be considered for a part on the school's leadership committee, and the next year she assigned me to both the leadership committee and to a new committee called targeted team. As a result of serving on these committees, I was able to assist many teachers with filling out paperwork, brainstorming appropriate interventions, and ensuring that they were completing required interventions with integrity.

Debbie's intentional positioning for informal teacher leadership was student-centered because she wanted to support and improve student learning beyond her own classroom. She took action by letting her principal know that she was interested in a more substantial leadership role, and willingly accepted leadership positions on two committees when both were offered. As peer coach, leadership committee member, and targeted team member, Debbie demonstrated informal teacher leadership through the committee work itself as well as through one-on-one and small group assistance for teachers. She also positioned herself to grow professionally in the process.

Larry, a seventh grade teacher at Spring Lake Middle School who served on his school's student handbook and awards committees and delivered professional development at his district's annual Techno Expo, explained the importance of positioning for informal teacher leadership:

> Some of [becoming a teacher leader] comes from being given the opportunity to exercise leadership skills. The other comes from willingness to step up and become a teacher leader. Opportunities might be available, but if a teacher is not willing to become a leader, he/she never will.

Accepting or initiating school-level leadership roles and responsibilities establishes a foundation for informal teacher leadership because it positions teachers to positively influence teaching and learning beyond their own classrooms. The positive influences of Michelle, Angela, and Debbie became clear within several weeks' or months' time. But as Larry pointed out, even when positioned for informal teacher leadership, a teacher may not take student-centered action immediately. Moreover, positive influences on teaching and learning may be indirect or unknown, creating invisible teacher leadership.

Invisible teacher leadership. Fourth grade teacher Marie made a commitment to attend more evening school events, although she was not required by contract to do so. Her voluntary attendance was an important act of teacher professionalism, but not necessarily informal teacher leadership. Marie reflected:

> Some years I have participated in school events, and other years I have not. Before I began this [STEM education master's] program, I mainly only attended events that were required of me. But after taking the first teacher leadership course and realizing I wanted to be a more contributing member of my school, I made a point to attend many of my school's events and did my best to make a substantial contribution.

The school events mentioned by Marie, including math night, reading night, and back-to-school night, were designed to be student-centered, and Marie took action by making a commitment to attend such events more often. However, positive influence on teaching and learning as a result of her actions is not clear.

Attendance at school events does not constitute informal teacher leadership unless actions taken in preparation for, during, or following the event positively influence teaching and learning beyond one's own classroom. For example, Marie could have demonstrated informal teacher

leadership by helping to coordinate a student-centered event, leading a session or formally speaking during the event, or helping teachers or parents follow through after the event concludes. Even though Marie did not take these actions, it is possible that her voluntary attendance at evening school events positively influenced teaching and learning indirectly or unknowingly, supporting the conception of invisible teacher leadership (Donaldson, 2007; Killion, 2009; Urbanski & Nickolaou, 1997). For example, Marie's presence may have communicated the importance of math, reading, or the beginning of the new school year to students and their families. Or, Marie may have modeled professionalism for fellow teachers in her school by giving up personal time to attend evening school events. Whether or not Marie demonstrated informal teacher leadership through this experience, her voluntary attendance at evening school events positioned her to accept or initiate school-level leadership roles and responsibilities that might have positively influenced teaching and learning beyond her own classroom. Killion (2009) writes, "It is the invisible leaders whose actions serve as models for others that can sometimes be the most compelling influencers within a school," (p. 7). Even when positive influences on teaching and learning are delayed, indirect, or unknown, accepting or initiating school-level leadership roles and responsibilities establishes a foundation for informal teacher leadership.

School-level Leadership Roles and Responsibilities and Informal Teacher Leadership

By design, school-level leadership roles and responsibilities are student-centered and action-oriented (Portin, Alejano, Knapp, & Marzolf, 2006). Danielson's (2007) framework for teaching emphasizes involvement in school- and district-wide initiatives as an important element of participating in a professional community. At the proficient level of performance, "volunteers to participate" and "making a substantial contribution" (p. 103) describe teachers' active pursuit

toward service to the school and participation in school and district projects. At the distinguished level of performance, teachers "assume a leadership role in at least one aspect of school life" or "in a major school or district project" (p. 103). Indeed, school-level teacher leaders provide crucial support in today's schools, serving students directly and indirectly through leadership roles such as resource provider, data coach, mentor, learning facilitator, and curriculum/instruction specialist (Killion & Harrison, 2006; Nazareno, 2013). These student-centered actions describe how teachers position themselves to positively influence teaching and learning beyond their own classrooms.

Danielson's framework (2007) also emphasizes leadership roles and responsibilities as an important element of growing and developing professionally. At the proficient level, teachers "participate actively in assisting other educators" (p. 105). At the distinguished level, teachers "initiate important activities to contribute to the profession" (p. 105). Debbie sought professional growth when she asked for a seat on her school's leadership committee. Flumerfelt, Ingram, Brockberg, and Smith (2007) explain that teacher knowledge, dispositions, and professional practice are "dynamic, interconnected and relational learning processes" (p. 108). In other words, teachers learn on the job, and from each other. Moreover, teachers who engage in leadership grow professionally, as teachers and as teacher leaders, especially when they lead collaboratively (Gutierrez & Bryan, 2010; Hunzicker, 2012; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). To summarize, student-centered, action-oriented efforts through school-level leadership roles and responsibilities do not immediately or always prompt informal teacher leadership. However, they position teachers to positively influence teaching and learning beyond their own classrooms and offer the added benefit of professional development when teachers collaborate to solve instructional problems or complete instructional tasks.

Intentional Selection of Leadership Roles and Responsibilities

Not surprisingly, some teachers in the study had difficulty finding time to accept or initiate school-level leadership roles and responsibilities. Rose, busy managing the daily demands of teaching, explained, "I spend most of my free time making sure all accommodations are being met and getting caught up on work. I don't always serve on as many committees as I'd like." For Marie and Debbie, frequent reassignments and transfers challenged their pursuit of leadership roles and responsibilities. Marie, who taught five different grade levels in nine years, commented:

> In my early years of teaching, I struggled just to keep control of my classroom. I also switched grade levels and even districts for most of those years. This made it difficult to be comfortable with the curriculum and learning outcomes expected at each grade level. As a result, I only found limited ways to contribute to the profession.

After being reassigned to a different school, Debbie reflected similarly: "I feel as though I've had a setback as a teacher leader since my school closed and I am at a new one." Additionally, personal commitments and responsibilities made finding time to lead difficult for both teachers. "With busy schedules and life's stresses, it's easy to let after school events slip by," Marie shared. Debbie stated, "I currently am not seeking teacher leadership roles because I feel too busy with family and school."

Finding time is a well-documented issue for teachers. Saunders, Goldenberg, and Gallimore (2009) express concern that the time teachers need for grade-level and schoolwide collaboration often competes with "countless other initiatives and mandates" (p. 1029), which creates fragmentation and overload. Additionally, teachers' personal commitments compete with their professional roles and responsibilities. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) write, "Every

educator experiences times when professional life must take a backseat to personal life" (p. 104). As such, a teacher's leadership efforts may vary from year to year; those who choose to lead are "individuals whose professional life is one of their highest priorities – at least for the time being" (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 104).

To streamline her informal teacher leadership efforts, Michelle became more intentional over time. She explained:

> As a first year teacher, I was recruited to fill various roles needed by my school and district. I said yes to almost everything despite my lack of experience because I figured jumping in with two feet was really the only way to learn. In some ways I was right, but in other ways I quickly learned that quantity and quality are two very different concepts. To best serve my school, I needed to be more deeply involved in a few areas rather than try to spread myself so thin. In addition, I needed to leave room for others to take on leadership roles as well. Rather than putting myself on a committee because my principal asked me to serve, I began volunteering for causes that were more relevant to my own goals as a teacher and a leader. I tried to learn to say no sometimes and to be more selective, so as not to over-commit myself. I want to be involved in my school, but I want to give my best, and sometimes that means doing less, but doing it better.

Illustrated earlier, Debbie also intentionally selected leadership roles and responsibilities when she sought a seat on her school's leadership committee and volunteered to coach her grade-level team in using 95 Percent Group.

Student-focused concerns and leadership self-efficacy. Although Michelle and Debbie intentionally selected leadership roles and responsibilities to streamline their leadership efforts,

most teachers in the study took action toward teacher leadership by addressing student-focused concerns in circumstances where they felt capable of succeeding.

Student-focused concerns. Teachers in the study expressed underlying student-focused concerns through their actions, and sometimes with words. Rose was concerned about the number of IEP students with D/Fs in world history. Debbie believed that her Mexican student was not receiving the instructional services he needed. Larry, who used data sources such as Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) and McGraw-Hill Classroom Performance System (CPS) to monitor student progress in his seventh grade classroom, revealed his concern for students when he remarked, "Students absolutely love using it, so I try to incorporate it often to meet their needs." Angela and Michelle also articulated student-focused concerns that motivated their actions. Reflecting on her schoolwide efforts to strengthen teachers' data analysis skills, Angela wrote, "This has allowed me to find more tailored ways to instruct each student." Explaining her support for a longer school day even when it was unpopular, Michelle reflected, "I have always believed that every student is capable of learning. Too often, we have to work with teachers who don't hold that belief, or aren't willing to change their practices when necessary."

Teachers in the study took action to address student-focused concerns through student advocacy and school-level leadership roles and responsibilities. Based on their student-focused concerns, some teachers advocated for their own students but ended up exerting positive influence beyond their own classrooms. Others intentionally took action to positively influence teaching and learning at the grade/team level, schoolwide, district-wide, and even statewide. Studies show that teachers are generally motivated to accept or initiate school-level leadership roles and responsibilities when they see potential student benefits (Lattimer, 2007; Lieberman &

Friedrich, 2007; Moller & Pankake, 2006). When teachers cannot affect students directly, they often step forward when they believe their efforts will build teaching capacity schoolwide (Killion, 2011b; Reid, 2011). The professional development provided by Angela, Debbie, and Larry offer three illustrations.

Intentional selection of leadership roles and responsibilities has been documented as an indicator of teacher leadership. When one on-site reform coach realized that she could not do everything, she learned to ask, “Where would my work be most beneficial?” (Herll & O’Drobinak, 2004, p. 44). In addition to streamlining their leadership efforts, research shows that teachers demonstrate intentional selection in their professional growth efforts. Specifically, teachers engage in “effective and repeated practice of the professional behaviors that [they] expect to change” (Reeves, 2009, p. 48). For example, Anne devoted time and effort to individualized instructional planning. Marie attended several evening school events after making a commitment to do so. Michelle, who wanted to develop more assertiveness in speaking out on behalf of students, reflected, “One way I would like to grow in this area is knowing when and how to speak up rather than closing my eyes to the situation.”

Silva and colleagues (2000) explain that teacher leaders “demonstrate publicly their own hesitancy at times to face change, but also their ultimate willingness to frame change as a growth opportunity” (p. 13). Based on their student-focused concerns, teachers in the study intentionally selected student advocacy efforts and school-level leadership roles and responsibilities that positioned them to positively influence teaching and learning. As they accumulated school-level leadership experiences, some teachers also grew professionally. One area of professional growth was increased leadership self-efficacy.

Leadership self-efficacy. Bandura (1994) and Pajares (2002) explain that self-efficacy begins when an individual commits to solving a problem or completing a task that she/he highly values. Self-efficacy is sustained through an individual's confidence that she/he can succeed, paired with perseverance toward completion despite resistance or setbacks. Wilhelm (2013) expounds, "Teachers grow as leaders as they incrementally learn new skills together in a safe environment encouraged by the principal and then apply these skills in their course-alike or grade-level team collaborations" (p. 65). Teachers in this study valued and committed to addressing student-focused concerns; they demonstrated confidence by speaking out on behalf of students and intentionally selecting leadership roles and responsibilities; and they persevered through their continued efforts.

When an individual believes she/he is capable of accomplishing a challenging task, she/he is more likely to exert effort and persevere to completion (Bandura, 1994; Pajares, 2002). Teachers in the study felt capable of succeeding when they believed their leadership skills matched their particular circumstances. For example, Doris, whose first grade-level team sought resources for differentiated, inquiry-based math and science activities, explained, "You have to go to the right people, you have to know when, and you have to provide evidence to back up what you're saying." Indeed, an important aspect of leadership self-efficacy is having the knowledge and skills necessary to positively influence those with decision-making power. Silva and colleagues (2000) assert, "Teacher leaders must be able to recognize existing structures of schools – the culture and the organizational politics – and be able to share their insights in system-appropriate ways" (p. 11). Angela used her role as lead teacher to positively influence teaching and learning, Rose accomplished it with an e-mail message, and Debbie engaged in conversations with school-level administrators over the course of an entire academic year.

Motivated toward informal teacher leadership due to student-focused concerns, these teachers took action because they believed their leadership skills matched their particular circumstances. Although their approaches were very different, all three were successful in positively influencing teaching and learning beyond their own classrooms, and may have built leadership self-efficacy in the process.

Importantly, self-efficacy strengthens as an individual accepts, struggles with, and prevails over challenging tasks, as opposed to easy ones (Bandura, 1994; Pajares, 2002). This may explain why Marie voluntarily attended evening school events, but did not demonstrate informal teacher leadership. When teachers believe that "in general they can cope with difficult situations," they are more likely to "execute the behavior that is needed to meet situational demands" (Runhaar, Sanders, & Huadong, 2010, p. 1159). Bangs and Frost (2012) add, "A teacher with strong beliefs in his or her own efficacy will be resilient, able to solve problems and, most importantly, learn from their experience" (p. 3).

Positioning for informal teacher leadership was one way some teachers in the study increased their leadership self-efficacy. As they advocated for students or engaged in school-level leadership roles and responsibilities and realized that they were positively influencing teaching and learning beyond their own classrooms, some continued their efforts or pursued new leadership roles and responsibilities. Michelle's successful experience on her school's scheduling committee motivated her to join her district's curriculum renewal and articulation committee, where she helped create new math curriculum guides. Because Larry enhanced his classroom instruction with various technologies and provided professional development for teachers district-wide, he became known as a technology expert among his colleagues. Anne reported

feeling more confident and effective as a result of her local and statewide student advocacy, and Marie felt more comfortable attending evening school events after she had attended a few.

More than any other teacher in the study, Debbie intentionally crafted her own style of teacher leadership, which may reflect her leadership self-efficacy. Although she reported not always feeling like a teacher leader, she demonstrated informal teacher leadership in many ways: advocating for her Mexican student, making a case for a bilingual special education classroom, pursuing an instructionally-focused school-level committee, and providing instructional assistance for her peers. Even Debbie's decision not to pursue school-level leadership roles and responsibilities after being transferred to a different school exemplifies her use of intentional selection as an appropriate means of self-management (Marzano et al., 2005).

Like Debbie, not all teacher leaders readily view themselves as leaders. In one study, a third grade teacher made numerous efforts to positively influence teaching and learning in her school, but did not view herself as a teacher leader until her principal asked her to lead the process of math curriculum planning (Hirsh, 2011). The contrast between Debbie's perceptions and behavior may represent wavering leadership self-efficacy, which may be common among teachers. A recent international survey revealed that most teachers are comfortable initiating or leading school-related efforts within their prescribed roles and responsibilities, but not beyond their designated circle of influence (Bangs & Frost, 2012). Debbie most demonstrated leadership self-efficacy when functioning within her prescribed roles of classroom teacher, committee member, and 95 Percent Group expert. It is possible that her customized approach to informal teacher leadership was due to strong leadership self-efficacy in these specific areas, paired with her motivation to address student-focused concerns and grow professionally.

Distinguishing Informal Teacher Leadership

The International Teacher Leadership (ITL) project advocates that "all teachers are entitled, as professionals, to initiate and lead change, contribute to knowledge building and to have influence, both locally within their own schools, and more widely through collective action" (as cited in Bangs & Frost, 2012, p. 6). When teachers demonstrate informal teacher leadership through student advocacy and school-level leadership roles and responsibilities, school leadership becomes "an interactive web of leaders and followers who periodically change roles as the situation warrants" (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 23). Motivated by student-focused concerns, teachers in the study spoke out on behalf of students and accepted or initiated school-level leadership roles and responsibilities. In doing so, they positioned themselves to positively influence teaching and learning beyond their own classrooms, and most were successful. Through their experiences, some grew professionally and built leadership self-efficacy in the process. This article illustrates that a student-centered, action oriented approach to teaching establishes a foundation for informal teacher leadership, but positive influence on teaching and learning beyond one's own classroom distinguishes informal teacher leadership from simply teacher professionalism.

Limitations

This article reflects only eight teachers' perspectives and relies heavily on participant self-reports. Even so, the illustrations presented here can deepen our understanding of informal teacher leadership based on the perspectives and contexts of these particular individuals (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stake, 2000). Although some may argue that components 4d, 4e, and 4f of Danielson's (2007) framework for teaching may have led and/or limited the scope of research participants' written self-reflections, studies show that self-reflection is more systematic and analytic when it is structured rather than open-ended (Kolar & Dickson, 2002) and considers

both theory and practice (Bean & Stevens, 2002). Without a doubt, participants' written self-reflections were thorough and forthcoming, providing rich and detailed information about their experiences with informal teacher leadership. However, a stronger approach to member checking, such as conducting a focus group session before participants graduated or offering an e-mail or phone alternative, may have increased the number of participants who authenticated the analysis.

Conclusion

The distinction between informal teacher leadership and teacher professionalism is difficult to discern, and this article offers only one approach to illustrating informal teacher leadership in action. Although more empirical research is needed, teachers can use the illustrations provided here for affirmation and inspiration. Following completion of the study, all eight teachers went on to earn the Illinois teacher leader endorsement, a statement added to their teaching certificates recognizing their advanced training in teacher leadership. Moreover, six participants reported that they had advocated for at least one student in the past six months, and seven confirmed that they currently hold and/or continue to pursue leadership roles and responsibilities school- and district-wide. Collay (2006) writes, "As the field of teacher leadership matures, teachers may define leadership for themselves" (p. 132). It appears that the eight teachers in this study are already doing so.

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Appendix A: Participant Questionnaire

1. In what area of expertise do you hold a bachelor's degree?
2. Do you hold any additional degrees (bachelor's or master's)? If so, please list.
3. How many years of teaching experience do you have?
4. What is your current teaching position (subject, grade level, school name, district)?
5. How many years have you been in your current position?
6. Have you held other teaching positions in the past? If so, please provide a brief description of your past teaching experiences.
7. Do you have professional work experience outside of teaching? If so, please provide a brief description.
8. Why did you choose to pursue the STEM education master's program?
9. What are your professional goals upon completion of the STEM education master's program?
10. Do you think the MST 681 Teacher Leader Portfolio assignment provided accurate documentation of your growth as a teacher leader? Why or why not?
11. Do you consider yourself a teacher leader? Please explain.
12. In your opinion, how do teachers learn to exercise leadership?