

# Teacher Leaders and Equity-Centered Pedagogy: Empowerment and Development through Action Research

Jennifer Jacobs

University of South Florida

## **Abstract**

This qualitative research study examined the experiences of five teacher leaders enrolled in an instructional leadership master's degree cohort who engaged in equity-focused action research. Specifically, the study focused on *How do teacher leaders describe their development as equity-centered leaders after engaging in action research?*

Findings point to how teacher leaders became empowered and increased in their confidence to advocate for change. The teacher leaders also discussed the development of an equity-centered teacher leadership pedagogy that included: focusing on beliefs before pedagogy, using an asset-based view of teachers, and valuing voices of color.

Across the nation, school districts are responding to changing demographics as well as achievement gaps for students of color, English language learners, and low-income students. Deficit thinking, defined as blaming educational gaps on “the students or their families, not in the social ecology of the school, grade, or classroom” (Weiner, 2006, p. 42), exists as families and children are blamed for achievement disparities rather than looking at teaching practice, curriculum, or organizational structures that may be leading to these inequities (Valencia, 1997). Nieto and Bode (2012) explain that an equitable education means “all students must be given the real possibility of an equality of outcomes” (p. 9). Rather than providing an equal education, or

giving all students the same thing, an equitable education focuses on providing students what they need to be successful or achieve equality.

Schools need leaders committed to working toward greater equity. In the educational leadership literature, Theoharis (2007) describes leaders committed to equity or social justice as those who “make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision” (p. 223). While Theoharis’ (2007) work mainly points to principals who take a prominent role in developing equitable educational environments, schools must also begin to capitalize upon the expertise of teacher leaders (TLs) in this capacity. Rodriguez, Mantle-Bromley, Bailey, and Paccione (2003) share, “If change for underserved students is to occur, teachers who are committed to issues of equity must become active leaders in their schools” (p.229).

Teacher leaders are those who “lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders, and influence other toward improved educational practice” (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001, p. 5). Teacher leaders often move away from a sole focus on their classroom to collaborating, mentoring, and supporting the professional development of their fellow teachers (Lieberman & Miller, 2004). Silva, Gimbert, and Nolan (2000) found that the work of TLs can include navigating school structures, developing and nurturing relationships, modeling professional growth, helping other TLs with change, and challenging the status quo as advocates for children.

The literature focused on TLs who attend to equity issues has highlighted successful culturally responsive teachers as those who form relationships with students, challenge deficit views of diverse populations, understand the assets found within diverse communities, and

connect content and pedagogy to students' lives (Gay, 2010; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Interestingly, these descriptions are often found in the literature on cultural responsiveness, but not within the teacher leadership literature. For example, in York-Barr and Duke's (2004) comprehensive literature review on teacher leadership, there was not one reference to issues of equity or supporting culturally and linguistically diverse students

Building upon Theoharis' (2007) work, I use the term equity-centered teacher leadership to describe TLs who make issues of race, class, culture, gender, disability, sexual orientation, etc. central to their practice and vision both inside and outside of the classroom in order to facilitate educational contexts where all students have equal opportunity for success.

The purpose of this qualitative study focused on understanding how TLs within a graduate teacher leadership Master's program describe their development as equity-centered TLs after engaging in action research where they facilitated a small learning community of teachers focused on promoting change related to an equity issue.

### **Literature Review**

The literature serving as the theoretical basis for this study is connected to several key areas. One relates to the literature connected to the components and influence of graduate teacher leadership programs. Another area focuses on leadership for equity in regard to principals and teachers. Finally, this literature review discusses types of teacher knowledge that teachers can construct within professional learning.

### **Teacher Leadership and Graduate Education**

In the research literature, studies on the influence of formal teacher leadership graduate programs are lacking, with a greater focus on teacher leadership development within school settings (Taylor, Goeke, Klein, Onore, & Geist, 2011). The small amount of literature about

graduate teacher leadership programs often lacks information about the impact of these programs (Ross et al., 2011).

Within the small amount of studies focused on the influence of teacher leadership graduate programs, several themes emerge. Taylor et al. (2011) engaged in a three-year qualitative study of their graduate teacher leadership program. They found that as a result of participation within the program, teachers were able to find and use their professional voice. Teacher leaders also felt empowered as they moved outside of their classrooms to work as agents of change. This included working with other teachers, other schools, and the community. Ross et al. (2011) looked at the impact of their teacher leadership graduate program on teachers, their colleagues, and school improvement efforts in relation to teaching, instructional problem solving, leadership within the school, and other teachers in the school. The authors found that as a result of the program, teachers adopted an inquiry stance and began viewing themselves as autonomous professionals. The teachers also adopted a leadership stance and began to view student learning as a collective responsibility.

Discussions of equity and teacher leadership are often non-existent in the graduate teacher leadership literature (Jacobs, Beck, & Crowell, 2011). Leonard, Petta, and Porter (2012) looked across 21 teacher leader graduate programs to examine how they conceptualize teacher leadership. In their analysis of the vision, missions, goals, description, and curriculum of the programs, there was not one mention of anything connected to social justice and equity.

**Action research and teacher leadership programs.** Action research is a key element of many graduate TL programs (Phillips & Hollingsworth, 2005; Taylor, et. al., 2011). In their study of effective school leadership programs, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, and Orr (2010) found the existence of action research as a key pedagogical tool for graduate students to

make theory to practice connections. Specifically this process includes identifying an issue or problem within a school context, reviewing literature related to the issue, collecting data on that issue (often both quantitatively and qualitatively), analyzing the data, planning for change, and enacting change (Glanz, 2003; Stringer, 2007). While there are many different models of action research, key tenets include: context specificity, addressing real life dilemmas, stakeholder input and collaboration, reflection and action, and a commitment to improve practice (Glanz, 2003; Stringer, 2007). While traditional research may have a specified beginning and end, the action research process is a continuous cycle of reflection and action (Stringer, 2007).

Phillips and Hollingsworth (2005) examine the use of action research with literacy teachers as a method of moving these teachers toward greater activism in their schools. They had mixed reviews in how the teachers saw the importance of the action research process. Some teachers found this process to be a waste of time since they had no control of the curriculum they were teaching in their schools. Teachers also struggled with action research because many lacked research skills. Taylor et al. (2011) emphasize the importance of praxis (reflection and action) in teacher leadership development connected to action research. This Cycle of Praxis involves teacher leaders “simultaneously constructing and applying new knowledge and understandings which led, in turn, to new initiatives” (p. 926). The authors found that engaging in action research influenced the teacher leaders to feel ownership of their learning and view themselves as knowledge creators. Perez, Uline, Johnson, James-Ward, and Basom (2011) found that graduate students that engaged in a reflective, inquiry-based approach to learning became skilled at formulating problems, convening stakeholders, using data to show the needs for change, and increased confidence in improving student learning.

### **Leadership and Equity**

While many issues of inequity and racism are connected to larger systemic and macro conditions, the work of TLs on the ground level can make a difference in the lives and success of students (Nieto, 2007). While the literature contains a great deal of description in relation to teachers who are culturally responsive or equity-minded (see Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009), there is a lack of literature about what happens when these TLs move beyond their classroom and begin to work with other teachers. These TLs must not only have culturally responsive practices in their classrooms, but leadership skills to move beyond their classrooms (Nieto, 2007). “They embody particular behaviors and attitudes that help them teach their students, while at the same time challenging inequities both in their schools, and more broadly, in their communities as well” (p.308). Nieto (2007) describes TLs committed to equity as confronting and challenging “regimes of truth” (p.304) that are often invisible but serve to perpetuate inequities. This involves not remaining silent when seeing injustice and questioning colleagues even if it is uncomfortable.

The educational leadership literature has spent more time on this topic in the area leadership and equity or social justice. This literature describes these leaders (often referring to principals) as those who engage in critical self-reflection to recognize their own sociopolitical identities (Brown, 2006; Kose, 2007), identify systems and structures that lead to inequities, promote inclusive practices and equitable access to curriculum (Kose, 2009; McKenzie et al., 2008; Theoharis, 2007), and support teachers through professional development in developing curriculum and pedagogy that include multiple perspectives and experiences (Kose; McKenzie et al.). The reform efforts of TLs could connect to many of these characteristics described for principals.

Kose (2007) studied how leaders committed to equity promote professional development among teachers. Often referring to the role of principals, these studies also have implications for TLs. Kose (2007) found that professional development content to support teachers in understanding equity must attend to two integrated strands of professional learning. This includes professional learning in content areas to develop subject matter expertise as well as learning in the area of social identity development. Social identity development includes helping teachers understand their own personal diversity awareness, gaining affirming views of diversity, and understanding the concept of cultural capital. When these two areas were intertwined, this then leads to professional learning in differentiating instruction for diverse learners as well as teaching students about equity and social justice.

### **Types of Teacher Knowledge**

Graduate teacher leadership programs as well as action research are two tools that promote teacher learning. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) identify three types of knowledge that teachers build when engaged in professional learning. These three types of teacher knowledge include: knowledge *for* practice, knowledge *in* practice, and knowledge *of* practice.

Knowledge *for* practice connects to the formal domain of knowledge. Specifically, this often includes knowledge provided to teachers from those outside of the specific school context. This is often knowledge associated with formal theory and research that is often disseminated through publications, graduate programs, or outside experts. As teachers engage in action research they may build upon knowledge *for* practice as they begin to understand an issue in their context by reading the professional literature.

Knowledge *in* practice refers to knowledge that is often constructed by those within the classroom through practice and experience in the field. When teachers engage in action research

they are able to engage in professional learning that allows them to study their own practice and in turn generate context specific knowledge in practice.

The third type of knowledge generated by teachers is knowledge *of* practice. Not a combination of knowledge *for* and *in* practice, this third type of knowledge is generated when teachers “make problematic their own knowledge and practice as well as the knowledge and practice of others and thus stand in a different relationship to knowledge” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 273-274). In this view of knowledge, teachers do not necessarily just rely on knowledge from the outside or simply on their own teaching practice. In this conception of knowledge, “teachers learn when they generate local knowledge *of* practice by working within the contexts of inquiry communities to theorize and construct their work and to connect it to larger social, cultural, and political issues” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 25). Action research serves as a professional development tool by helping teachers develop knowledge *in* and *of* practice.

### **Context**

This educational leadership program, located in a southwestern public university, affords students the opportunity to pursue a Masters in Education with principal certification or a Master of Arts in instructional leadership. In an effort to increase the relevancy of the role graduate education plays in improving instruction within schools, the department sought to revive the instructional leadership track. To these ends, two years ago we began a partnership with a local district to recruit potential students to become a part of an instructional leadership cohort. This cohort provides the district an opportunity to grow a group of in-house teacher leaders. This work was especially timely as over the past several years this district has shifted from having a predominantly White student population to including greater amounts of students of color as well



as English language learners. Given the unique orientation of the program focused on equity, the districts' need to support an increasingly diverse student population aligned with our focus on developing culturally responsive, equity-focused TLs.

The instructional leadership curriculum begins with critical self-reflection on beliefs about leadership and education. Subsequent courses focus on professional development, supervision, community engagement, curriculum design, and instructional models. In the culminating courses, students are asked to develop an action research project. Since this master's program has a specific focus on equity, most projects link to topics such as race, class, gender, ability, etc. Also, since this master's program is focused on leadership, their action research must move beyond their individual classroom to influence the larger school community. For example, TLs work with grade levels, curriculum departments, the community, or teachers from across the school.

For the action research, TLs collaboratively work with a group of school staff to identify an instructional concern. From there they often work individually to write a literature review, and collect a variety of data. At that point they work with a group of interested colleagues at their school to analyze the data and develop an action plan. For many students, this action plan involves the TL leading a small learning community of interested teachers on their campus to engage in professional learning related to their topic. Before actually implementing their decided plan of change, the TLs present their action research to a panel of graduate program faculty members as part of the final capstone of the program. The TLs receive feedback about their action research report and also feedback about their plan of action. The TLs then enroll in one of their final courses in the program focused on school change. The main project during this course is actually implementing their change effort. As part of this course, the TLs write weekly

reflections on the progress of their action plan as well as systemically collect and analyze data related to their work leading the learning community. The final evaluation for this course consists of a report outlining the themes that emerged during their action plan implementation. The professors within both of these courses supervise the action research process.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this qualitative study focused on addressing the question: *How do teacher leaders describe their development as equity-centered leaders after engaging in action research?* Given the focus of this research question, this study is epistemologically grounded in constructivism (Crotty, 1998). The goal is to understand the experience of the TLs' from their perspectives and how they make meaning.

Within this research, sampling was purposeful in contacting TLs who recently graduated from this instructional leadership cohort who designed and implemented an action research project focused on an equity issue (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). An equity issue is defined as focusing on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, or language. Out of the cohort of fifteen, ten action research projects fit the criteria. Five of the TLs elected to participate. All participants were female (one Latina, four White). Three TLs were classroom teachers and two held the position of instructional coach. This was a district position where the TLs worked with teachers across several schools specifically on math instruction. The following table provides information on all participants.

### **Insert Table 1 Here**

As seen within the table, the TLs focused on a variety of issues from equity for girls in mathematics, Latino student achievement, equity for novice teachers, and equitable achievement for African American students in mathematics. All five of the TLs implemented an action plan

on their campuses that involved convening a small study group or learning community of teachers who volunteered to be part of the process. The groups met approximately four to eight times over the spring semester. Activities within groups included: reading articles, critical dialogue to unpack beliefs, analysis of achievement data, reflective writing, simulation activities, and case study. As a faculty member in this leadership program, I have taught both action research courses and also served as program coordinator. For these particular participants, I taught their class focused on action plan implementation and understanding processes of school change.

A variety of data collection techniques were used in order to understand the TLs development. Archival documents consisted of two assignments from the school change class. This included a 30-50 page academic paper the TLs wrote after their change effort was complete. This paper consisted of a technical description of their action research, themes synthesized from their work over the semester, and reflections on what they learned. Other documents included eight reflective journals the TLs wrote throughout the school change class that chronicled their feelings about taking action on their campuses. Finally, data collection involved an in-depth interview (Kvale, 1996) that took place at the beginning of the semester immediately following action research completion. The interview guide consisted of questions focused on prompting TLs to reflect on what they learned during the process of implementing their action plans including the challenges they faced, successes, and how they negotiated this process. Interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis began with open coding of all archival documents and interview transcripts by individual participant (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Within each participant, similar open codes were grouped to make initial themes or patterns (Yin, 2003). For example, for Mary these

initial themes included facing resistance, feeling empowered, and purposefulness in dialogue. For Lisa, these included confronting deficit thinking, building relationships, finding a voice, and changing pedagogy. After themes were developed for each TL, then analysis moved to looking across all the TLs. This began by looking at the individual themes within each teacher leader and using these as beginning open codes to re-code all of the data. Analysis then moved to identifying overarching themes about common elements or processes of development across all TLs. As can be seen in Mary and Lisa's examples, individual TL themes such as feeling empowered and finding a voice were connected into a larger overarching theme of empowerment. The larger theme of developing an equity-centered pedagogy began by first bringing all the initial themes connected to pedagogy together and looking for commonalities across. Looking across these themes related to the TLs learning, the theme of the uniqueness of equity change emerged as a common thread. These instances of pedagogy were then analyzed further to develop the three sub-themes related to beliefs before pedagogy, approaching deficit thinking, and the voices of color.

Trustworthiness was built through the use of multiple method triangulation (report, reflections, and interviews). In addition, themes were shared with each of the participants to allow for member checking (Patton, 2002). At this point, participants had the opportunity to comment on the findings. To add to this trustworthiness, since I was not only the researcher, but co-coordinator of the instructional leadership cohort, I made sure to share the data and analysis with a critical friend not associated with the program to gain another perspective.

### **Findings**

The participants all discussed their development as equity-centered TLs as they engaged in the process of action research. An overarching theme was that the TLs felt empowered. They

explained that they were able to move their change effort forward and advocate for change. The TLs also began to develop their pedagogy as equity-centered TLs as they named various key elements that guided their work with teachers.

### **Becoming Empowered as Equity-Centered Teacher Leaders**

All the TLs shared that as they engaged in action research, they developed feelings of empowerment in their role as equity-centered TLs. They began to feel that they could make a difference in schools. Short (2003) defines teacher empowerment as a “process whereby school participants develop the competence to take charge of their own growth and resolve their own problems” (p.488). Erica shared in her interview,

We saw this need, we thought it was a problem, we collected the data, we saw that it *was* a problem, and then put a plan in place to maybe effect some change. That was exciting! Action research became a process that provided them with direction when faced with inequities on their campus. Mary shared in the final reflection of her action research report:

And we [the school] need to be more culturally responsive to our kids. Now I have a place to go. It's not just floating out there somewhere. There's something that needs to be changed. What is it? There's a focus. There's something that I know I can do. There is a jumping off point to go forward. And it, it gave me a sense of purpose. To say, I see this. I want to make a change.

The TLs also discussed how they developed confidence in standing up for equity issues. Mary talked about being less willing to accept the status quo in her reflective journal.

Because before I thought if people give it to you, you just do it. I guess that's how I was raised. If your boss tells you this is what you do, you just do it. Now I look at things differently. Now I would ask why...

Isabel shared in her reflective journal, “I’ve always stood up for students, for what I feel is right for a student, but not necessarily with my colleagues.” She talked about standing up to a colleague in her action research group who wanted to refer an African American boy for special education testing because the boy’s parents were not helping him at home. Isabel questioned the teacher by asking, “What have you tried in the classroom?” Lisa talked about being empowered to stand up for students as well. She said in her interview, “I want to be part of the change agent for students. I want all students to be treated with respect and for them to be given access to the education all students deserve.” Many TLs discussed how they felt empowered due to all of the data they had collected from both stakeholders and the research literature. Erica said in her interview, “We are speaking up probably more than we ever would have before, just cause we are armed with more information.”

The TLs who held district positions explained how they felt empowered to advocate for change at the district level. In her interview, Erica talked about a meeting with the district professional development coordinator and curriculum director where she advocated for equity of support for novice math teachers. She was able to draw upon her research to push for change.

When I asked,

‘What can we do to be sure the novice teachers have sufficient support to start the school year?’ both ladies began to speak about mentors and I could not help but interrupt! I began rattling off all the reasons why the mentors have not been successful in supporting novices during the first week: some mentors have not even committed to being a mentor yet, mentors on growth plans and second year teachers are not equipped to handle their classrooms much less help another teacher, etc. They both agreed that the mentoring program has some issues. First and foremost, anyone breathing qualifies to be a mentor

under our current system! When I suggested that we come up with some requirements to guide the administrators, the PD Director jumped on board. In fact, she wants to create an application process.

Erica felt compelled to raise her voice on the issue. “If I do not push back on the system, who will?” Not only did the TLs begin to feel empowered to speak up and work for change, but they began to build professional knowledge about the type of pedagogy they needed to enact in order to work for change.

### **Developing an Equity-Centered Teacher Leadership Pedagogy**

One overarching theme across the TLs related to the unique nature of change focused on issues of equity and therefore, how their pedagogy must be unique. The TLs shared that they all engaged in professional learning while engaging in action research that prompted the development of an equity-centered teacher leadership pedagogy guiding their work with teachers. The elements of this unique pedagogy included: attending to beliefs before pedagogy, using an asset-based view of teachers, and valuing the voices of teachers of color.

**Concentrating on beliefs before pedagogy.** The focus of the master’s program was *instructional* leadership, but many of the TLs began to realize that before a focus on instruction, there needed to be a focus on beliefs. Trying to “fix” teachers or “tell” them how to be equitable would not work. Change would not occur with generic discussions of pedagogy or content. The TLs discussed how educators must understand their own beliefs and biases in order to reflect on their interactions with students. Sara shared in her interview:

At first I really questioned where to start in this process. I wanted to go right to classroom pedagogy and classroom management strategies. However, understanding yourself and your own culture has to be the first step or the other information is meaningless. I am

unsure how effective four meetings will be in moving all participants towards an understanding of their personal culture. My hope is that it will start the process for these participants and influence them to involve others in the start of a process.

Sara further reflected on how she brought into question her prior practice in working with teachers. She explained, “I guess I just realized that this is my third year in the job, and I’ve been concentrating on pedagogy all this time, and there is still achievement gap.”

All the TLs talked about being extremely reflective and purposeful in having to include a major focus on beliefs within their change effort. For example, Mary shared in her interview:

You have to think about their attitudes and their beliefs before you can throw change at them. How are they going to react to this change, and how do they feel about change?

Not just about how they are going to react to it. But why are they reacting this way? What is it about this change that affects them and the way they’re going to work?

This focus on beliefs influenced where Lisa began her work with teachers around achievement for girls in mathematics. In her reflective journal, Lisa described having teachers write a “mathography” reflecting on their experiences throughout their lives connected to becoming a math teacher and how this influenced their beliefs about teaching mathematics. The TLs talked about how change in relation to understanding issues of equity and diversity was especially difficult because of the time needed to focus on beliefs.

**Using an asset-based view of teachers.** The TLs discussed how they often confronted with resistance and specifically deficit thinking (Valenica, 1997) when working with teachers about issues of equity. The TLs became surprised by the extent of the deficit thinking. For example, Mary shared in her reflective journal:



I didn't want to believe that it was true about my campus because I always thought of my campus as such a friendly place. You know, you don't want to believe that about the people you work with. I don't want to think that the teachers at my campus are not culturally responsive.

The TLs began to recognize deficit thinking in others and acknowledge the detrimental effects this view could have on students both socially and academically. While the TLs repeatedly talked about the need for teachers to reframe deficit thinking, they also discussed their responsive approach to confronting teacher's deficit thinking. Sara shared in her reflective journal:

I don't know if it's [deficit thinking] as purposeful as I think I might have originally thought. I think it's more unintentional than overt. I think what I saw was just a group of people not knowing what to do or what they were doing. And even just misconceptions on their part...

The TLs explained trying not to view the teachers in a deficit manner. They were cognizant of not turning around and blaming teachers for their deficit thinking, just as the teachers had blamed students and parents. Instead, the TLs spoke about believing most teachers were not purposeful in their deficit thinking, but lacked experiences with diversity or building knowledge about equity.

Isabel talked in her interview about trying to understand the teachers in terms of their beliefs. "I have to understand where they are coming from..." Mary discussed her belief in teachers' ability to grow and move forward. She referenced her own growth in relation to deficit thinking throughout the master's program. Mary explained in the final reflection of her action research report,

I know that at some point in my life, I felt that way. And it's taken me a long time to unpack what I believe and change a lot of the ways that I feel and realize that yes we all have deficit thinking, and ...sometimes you don't even realize it's deficit until you've learned what deficit thinking is... And when you first realize you have deficit thinking, sometimes you're blindsided and it hits you in the face and you're like, 'I can't believe I thought that way. All those years I did that.' If they [teachers] haven't been taught any different, they don't know. I had some of those same beliefs. If you had interviewed me four years ago, before I had diversity training or anything, I would have had some of the same answers.

Instead of using a deficit lens to view teachers, the TLs used a lens of possibility. While the TLs did not blame the teachers for deficit thinking, they also did not ignore this type of thinking. Several TLs talked about feeling compelled and confident to respond to teachers who spoke in a deficit nature about parents and children. Sara explained that in the past she would shy away from responding to deficit thinking, but was afraid of engaging in conflict. She shared in her interview,

I can remember talking to Dr. G in the supervision class about comments that people made that were just really out of line and not knowing what to do or how to handle it. But now I say, 'Is that really what you meant?' and 'Is that what you meant to say?' It's almost like I can't just let things slide at all.

**Valuing voices of color.** Each of the TLs specifically discussed how building relationships with teachers of color became a key piece of the equity-centered teacher leadership pedagogy. Most of the TLs did not have teachers of color in their learning communities and talked about wishing this was not the case. Lisa and Erica, who both lacked racial diversity in

their group, lamented in their interview about what this meant for their change efforts. Erica shared in her interview, “I wished I had some more diversity with the new teachers, especially thinking about the campus they were on and trying to connect. I think some of them had a hard time connecting with their diverse populations.”

Sara was the only teacher leader to have teachers/administrators of color in her learning community. She specifically talked about how the presence of voices of color was invaluable. In her final action research report, Sara shared:

When we read the *Unpacking the Knapsack* article, the first teacher started off, ‘The article is 20 years old and these things don’t happen anymore.’ It wouldn’t have had the same effect for me to say, ‘Yes, they still do!’ What happened was that other people in the group said, ‘Yes, they still do. And here is the example of this happening to me personally.’ It made it personal instead of theoretical.

Sara called this a “light bulb” moment when “you know someone thought of something one way and now their thinking was totally changed”. Sara did not want one person to have the position of speaking for an entire race, but did think multiple perspectives really made a difference.

While many of the TLs discussed the need for voices of color within their groups, the only teacher leader of color, Isabel, a Latina, discussed the struggles she faced engaging in action research. As the only voice of color in her learning community she often was fearful that teachers thought she was making up the information about inequities for Latinos. She felt the pressure of being a Latina focused on Latino student achievement in a predominantly White school. She explained in her reflective journal, “Personally, I felt because I did relate to the topic so well, I didn’t want people to think I was making up this data.” Isabel would bring data that

had not yet been analyzed or disaggregated and have the group do their analysis together. She went on to clarify in her interview, “I just wanted them to see it and make their own judgments, because I didn’t want them to think I was skewing it in any way.” Isabel also used the research literature as a way to add validity to her topic. She shared in the interview,

And I always wanted them to know – here’s the literature read it yourself – it wasn’t my opinion, and I’m just thinking up things in my head, and although I was deeply related to the topic, it was something that our whole campus needed to be just as passionate about. Not just because I was.

Isabel utilized a White ally, who had also been a part of the instructional leadership program to support her during meetings. When Isabel would bring up ideas, such as White privilege, the White colleague would show support and add to the dialogue. Isabel explained, “That was really helpful because everyone was White and I was the only person of color.” As a Latina, Isabel had unique challenges negotiating equity work. She often felt that her voice was not necessarily valued, and unlike the other TLs she struggled most getting her group to buy into the inequities at her campus. This influenced the level of empowerment she felt within her role as an equity-centered TL.

While engaged in the process of action research, these TLs were able to develop new knowledge that resulted in a pedagogical approach to teacher leadership connected to equity issues.

## **Discussion**

As the TLs engaged in the process of action research, they began to develop as equity-centered teacher leaders. Part of this development involved becoming empowered and feeling confident that they could indeed work toward change and stand up for inequities they noticed

within their school and the district. In addition, the TLs began to develop their pedagogy so they could work toward change in a way that was responsive to the unique nature of equity issues. This pedagogy included: addressing personal beliefs before pedagogy, viewing the assets of teachers, and valuing the voices of teachers of color. The findings from this research not only help us learn about the specific ways in which TLs developed or the content of their development, but also learn about the process of how they developed.

### **The Content of Development**

In terms of the content of development, the TLs began to name specific elements related to their pedagogy of equity-centered teacher leadership. Within the action research process, the TLs began to see the unique route they needed to take as they enact this equity-centered TL pedagogy.

One component of this pedagogy connected to the centrality of beliefs. For many of the TLs, their first instinct was to work with teachers on the technical or changing pedagogy, but quickly saw the extensive time that would be needed for reflection on beliefs. Focusing simply on the technical dimension (Oakes, 1992) of change is not enough. In her research on tracking, Oakes (1992) highlights the need for technical, normative, and political dimensions of change in equity-centered reform. The normative dimension involves “a critical and unsettling rethinking of the most common and fundamental educational beliefs and values” (p.19). Another unique element of the TLs pedagogy connected to valuing the voices of color. Within the change literature, relationships are highlighted (Fullan, 2007). However, within the TLs equity change efforts, there was also the inclusion of voices of color that may have been marginalized in the past. This also includes examining the unique experiences of TLs of color.

Looking at educational change in a neutral manner can be detrimental to the change. Durden (2008) discusses how Comprehensive School Reform models specifically targeted at schools with large populations of culturally and linguistically diverse often lack attention to culture and the experiences of children. Ladson-Billings (1995) makes a similar argument in how culturally relevant teaching goes beyond what some teachers might say as “That’s just good teaching!” A unique lens must be employed to understand change in relation to equity issues. This has significant implications for graduate leadership preparation programs. Graduate programs must not only support TLs in their development of knowledge related to understanding issues of equity, but also must support the development of a leadership pedagogy that has unique elements connected to equity. If not, we may be setting TLs up for failure as they try to support teacher professional learning about issues of equity.

While the other TLs became empowered as part of their development, Isabel still struggled with feelings of disempowerment. As the only TL of color, Isabel had a unique experience. This is an area in need of further research. What are the unique experiences of TLs of color in implementing equity-focused change? How are teacher education and educational leadership programs supporting TLs of color? Are we setting these students up for failure when we do not discuss the unique challenges they will face in leadership situations?

### **The Process of Development**

Often issues of equity are seen as impossible to change when viewed as being connected to macro issues of discrimination, inequitable systems, and oppression (Nieto, 2007). However, TLs were able to make change at a micro level using action research as a tool. The TLs were able to speak up about equity issues and work to make real change on their campuses as well as in the district. Nieto (2007) describes one of the roles of TLs committed to equity and social justice is

that they do not remain silent when they hear deficit thinking. TLs grew in their confidence and knowledge to speak up for equity issues as they engaged in the process of action research. The TLs were able to move their practice beyond the individual classroom to the larger school and district context.

While engaged in the process of action research, the TLs not only developed in their feelings of empowerment to make change, but engaged in professional learning about how to enact this change by developing an equity-centered teacher leadership pedagogy. While in the earlier classes of the master's program, the TLs developed knowledge *for* practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) as they engaged in discussion, read articles, developed projects, etc. connected to equity and social justice. These TLs spent two years within their master's program exploring their own beliefs about issues of equity and building a knowledge base. This knowledge *for* practice was formal and delivered through the master's program. However, at the final point of the program while engaged in action research, the TLs were able to develop knowledge *in* and *of* practice as they learned about their specific context and worked with other teachers to interrogate and change practice. The TLs not only learned through outside sources, but were able to study, question, and dialogue about their own practice and beliefs as well as colleagues. During this engagement in action research, the TLs were able to begin to build knowledge *in* and *of* practice related to enacting equity-centered teacher leadership pedagogy.

Therefore, TLs developed as equity-centered teacher leaders in their ability to make change within and beyond their classroom as well as develop pedagogy to enact this change. In terms of leadership preparation, programs cannot simply include action research and hope that their graduates become equity-centered teacher leaders. At the same time, programs cannot assume that if they provide knowledge *for* practice related to equity issues that TLs will be able

to enact change. These findings point to the need for a combination of both knowledge *for* practice, plus the opportunity to develop knowledge *in* and *of* practice. Action research became a tool to build this knowledge *in* and *of* practice.

These findings prompt reflection on areas for further research. One area would be looking at how this process of development as equity-centered TLs could occur within graduate programs with another area of focus. For example, if a literacy graduate program wanted to develop TLs in the area of literacy, they would need to help TLs construct knowledge *for* practice related to literacy and leadership through coursework. However, they would then need to provide students with opportunity to use action research in order to become empowered to make change and develop pedagogy for literacy teacher leadership. Another area of research would be to follow up with these TLs to see if they are able to continue enacting this equity-centered teacher leadership. Do the TLs continue to use action research as a process for change? How do they negotiate this work after they have graduated from the program? What challenges do they face? It would also be interesting to study the knowledge constructed by the other teachers that were involved in their action research. How did they grow and develop as equity-centered teacher leaders? Another focus would be to look at the principals in these schools. How did they support or hinder the development of this TL pedagogy?

Our schools need to move toward change in order to support the development of equitable school contexts where there is a greater opportunity for all students to succeed. This task is too enormous for school principals to take on alone. Teacher leaders have the potential to support grassroots change related to equity. This study points to the importance and potential of teacher leadership development in this area.



## References

- Brown, K. M. (2006). Leadership for social justice and equity: Evaluating a transformative framework and andragogy. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 42(5), 700-745.
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. (1999). Relationships of knowledge and practice: Teacher learning in communities. *Review of Research in Education*, 24, 249-305.
- Creswell, J.W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Darling-Hammond, L., LaPointe, M., Meyerson, D., Orr, M. T., & Cohen, C. (2007). Preparing school leaders for a changing world: Lessons from exemplary leadership development programs. Stanford, CA: Stanford Educational Leadership Institute.
- Durden, T. (2008). Do your homework! Investigating the role of culturally relevant pedagogy in comprehensive school reform models serving diverse student populations. *Urban Review*, 40, 403-419.
- Fullan, M. G. (2007). *The new meaning of educational change*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, & practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Glanz, J. (2003). *Action research: An educational leader's guide to school improvement (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, Inc.

- González, N., Moll, L., & Amanti, C. (Eds.). (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Jacobs, J., Beck, J., & Crowell, L. (2012, April). *School improvement through action research: Conditions influencing equity-centered teacher leaders*. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association (AERA), Vancouver, British Columbia.
- Katzenmeyer, M. & Moller, G. (2001). *Awakening the sleeping giant. Helping teachers develop as leaders*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kose, B. W. (2007). Principal leadership for social justice: Uncovering the content of teacher professional development. *Journal of School Leadership, 17*(3), 276-312.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory into Practice, 34*(3), 159-165.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American students*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- Leonard, J., Petta, K., & Porter, C. (2012). A fresh look at graduate programs in teacher leadership in the United States. *Professional Development in Education, 38*(2), 189-204.
- Lieberman, A., & Miller, A. (2004). *Teacher leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- McKenzie, K. B., Christman, D. E., Hernandez, F., Fierro, E., Capper, C. A., Dantley, M., Gonzalez, M. L., Cambron-McCabe, N., & Scheurich, J. J. (2008). From the field: A proposal for educating leaders for social justice. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 44*(1), 111-138.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA; Jossey-Bass.

- Miles, M.B. & Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: A sources of new methods* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Nieto, S. (2007). The color of innovative and sustainable leadership: Learning from teacher leaders. *Journal of Educational Change*, 8, 299-309. DOI 10.1007/s10833-007-9044-8
- Oakes, J. (1992). Can tracing research inform practice? Technical, normative, and political considerations. *Educational Researcher*, 21(4), 12-21.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Perez, L.G., Uline, C.L., Johnson, J.F., James-Ward, C., & Basom, M.R. (2011). Foregrounding fieldwork in leadership preparation: The transformative capacity of authentic inquiry. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 47(1), 217-257.
- Phillips, R. & Hollingsworth, S. (2005). From curriculum o activism: A graduate degree program in literacy to develop teachers as leaders for equity through action research. *Educational Action Research*, 13, 85-102
- Rodriguez, F., Mantle-Bromley, C., Bailey, M., & Paccione, A. (2003). Professional development for teacher leaders. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 36, 225-230. Doi: 10.1080/10665680390254807
- Ross, D. Adams, A., Bondy, E., Dana, N., Dodman, S., & Swain, C. (2011). Preparing teacher leaders: Perceptions of the impact of a cohort-based, job-embedded, blended teacher leadership program, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27, 1213-1222.
- Silva, D.Y., Gimbert, B., Nolan, J. (2000). Sliding the Doors: Locking and Unlocking Possibilities for Teacher Leadership, *Teachers College Record*, 102(4), 779-804.
- Stringer, E. (2007). *Action Research (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Taylor, M., Goeke, J., Klein, E., Onore, C., & Geist, K. (2011) Changing leadership: Teachers lead the way for schools that learn. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27, 920-929.
- Theoharis, G. (2007). Social justice educational leaders and resistance: Toward a theory of social justice leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 43(2), 221-258.
- Valencia, R. (1997). *The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. Bristol, PA: The Falmer Press.
- Weiner, L. (2006). Challenging deficit thinking. *Educational Leadership*, 64(1), 42-45.
- Yin, R.K. (2002). *Case study research: Design and methods (3<sup>rd</sup> edition)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- York-Barr, J., & Duke, K. (2004). What do we know about teacher leadership? Findings from two decades of scholarship. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(3), 255-316.

Table 1

<b>Teacher Leader</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Years Experience</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Context for Action Research</b>	<b>Action Research Topic</b>
Mary	White	8	Third grade teacher	8% African American 2% Asian 74% Hispanic 17% White 65% Low SES	Latino student achievement in reading
Isabel	<i>Participant Information</i> Latina	10	First grade teacher	18% African American 8% Asian 26% Hispanic 50% White 22% Low SES	Latino student achievement
Erica	White	20	Secondary math instructional coach	17% African American 4% Asian 32% Hispanic 47% White 30% Low SES	Equity in mentoring novice math teachers
Lisa	White	25	Secondary math instructional coach	10% African American 11% Asian 16% Hispanic 63% White 12% Low SES	Equity for girls in secondary mathematics
Sara	White	18	Middle school math instructional coach	13% African American 10% Asian 21% Hispanic 56% White 23% Low SES	African American student achievement in math

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to:  
 Jennifer Jacobs, University of South Florida, Childhood Education and Literacy Studies  
 4202 E. Fowler Ave., Tampa, FL 33620, [Jjacobs8@usf.edu](mailto:Jjacobs8@usf.edu)