# The Essence of Teacher Leadership: A Phenomenological Inquiry of Professional Growth

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Teacher leadership is a key to school reform (Fullan, 2005), yet it is not a widely practiced educational application (Crowther, 2009). Collay (2006) called for education faculty to assist teachers in developing powerful professional identities, but in order for university faculty to become partners in preparing teacher leaders, programs must nurture teachers' confidence and capacity to have more influence on the school systems in which they serve (Uribe-Florez, Al-Rawashdeh, & Morales, 2014). The purpose of this research project was to identify themes that emerged from the final reflective papers of participants in an online graduate Teacher Leadership program. Researchers analyzed participants' perceptions of personal and professional growth in knowledge, skills, and dispositions, as well as confidence in abilities as change agents who positively influence school environments. Participants in the study reported increased confidence and ease in their current roles and desire to have more influence throughout their schools and districts.

    **Key words:** teacher leadership; professional growth; graduate programs

According to Fullan (2005), almost everyone agrees that the key to school reform is leadership but teachers are seldom leading the process. The phrase "I am just a teacher" is often the response when teachers are queried about their leadership roles (Helterbran, 2010, p. 2). Yet, Barth (2007), reporting the results of one doctoral student's analysis of more than 250 major reform studies, noted that "…the most prevalent recommendations for improving our nation's schools was that teachers should take on and share more of the leadership of their schools" (p. 10). Lieberman and Miller (2004) called teachers who take on leadership roles, formal or informal, change agents who tackle the increasing demands that schools face.  Valuing teachers and providing support for their leadership roles can have a significant impact on educational change (Gabriel, 2005).

Definitions of teacher leadership have been proposed and include both formal and informal roles. However, Murphy (2005) explains the complexity of defining teacher leadership. Researchers agree that teacher leaders have the capacity to improve teaching and learning, as well as the school environment and the profession (Khan & Malik, 2013; Nappi, 2014; Uribe-Florez et al., 2014).  Despite the many and varied efforts to describe teacher leadership and the literature support for the concept as central to improving schools, "the message has not yet reached teachers themselves in any large measure" (Helterbran, 2010, p. 2). Brenneman (2015) laments that while the idea of teacher leadership is widely acknowledged, it "…remains a stubbornly amorphous idea…" (p. 1).

## The Case for Legitimizing Teacher Leadership

The concept of teacher leadership as a powerful force in school reform is not new. According to Bond (2015), teacher leadership was recognized as an important field of study in the 1980s and since then, articles and books have been written on the subject. Crowther (2009) described a decades-long association with teacher leadership initiatives in four countries and concluded a convincing relationship between teacher leadership and enhanced school improvement. Yet, according to Crowther, the potential of teacher leadership has not been "actualized." Collay (2006) called for education faculty to embrace the concept of teacher leadership within educational leadership pedagogy and to become partners in preparing teacher leaders. Harris, Lowery-Moore, and Farrow (2008) argued for the inclusion of teacher leaders into teacher preparation programs. According to Lieberman (2015), for teacher leadership to become more widely recognized, researchers need to explore and understand practices that nurture teacher leadership skills. Teachers need to perceive their work as an act of "socially responsible" leadership, developing a powerful "professional identity" (Collay, 2006, p. 131-132). Lieberman and Miller (2004) note, "When teachers cast off the mantle of technical and managed worker and assume new roles as researchers, meaning makers, scholars, and inventors, they expand the vision of who and what they do" (p. 11). However, the culture of the school can form a great barrier to those who attempt to cast off these roles. In a meta-analysis of two decades of research on teacher leadership, the Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (2005) noted that it is clear that features "… of school structure and culture that stand in the way of teachers being able to facilitate improvement may prove detrimental to the sustainability of improvement efforts" (p. 4).

## The Resistance to Teacher Leadership

Lambert, Collay, Dietz, Kent, and Richert (2007) stressed that teachers are the greatest influence on students' academic success yet seldom lead the reform efforts. "Therefore, many teachers do not see themselves as leaders of adults or of the profession" (p. 107). Gabriel (2005) described teachers as essential to students' academic success and stressed that only through their recognition of their personal leadership capabilities can teachers have maximum impact on student achievement. Helterbran (2010) shared a comment offered by a master's in education student enrolled in a class in teacher leadership, "I think I have some leadership qualities, but I am just a teacher" (p. 2). Teachers who do take on leadership roles within a school or district, formal or informal, break the "… stereotypical isolation familiar to most teachers…" (Helterbran, 2010, p. 4), violating the cultural norms of the teaching profession described in the Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement Research Brief (2005).

Barth (2007) cited some of the reasons teachers may not choose leadership roles. There is a sense from some teachers that the principals do not want to share leadership. Other teachers cite the lack of recognition for their efforts when they take on informal leadership activities. The lack of time and the personal values of teachers who want to make a difference in the classroom working with students are among reasons for teachers not seeking leadership responsibilities. According to Brenneman (2015), "Advocates say the current interest in teacher leadership speaks to a need many teachers feel to influence education outside the classroom, without leaving it" (p. 1). Finally, bureaucratic and institutional norms do not promote the idea of teacher leadership: "Something deep and powerful within school cultures seems to work against teacher leadership" (Barth, 2007, p. 10). Helterbran (2010) added that teachers often receive no compensation for taking on leadership activities which involve more work and responsibility. Teachers are

exhausted with the constantly changing reform efforts that often are replacing the last dazzling program that has not had time to work. Teacher leadership initiatives may be seen as another new, short-lived initiative that does not actually bring change.

## The Impact of Teacher Leadership

Khan and Malik (2013) emphasized that promoting teacher leadership programs can aid in recruiting, motivating, and rewarding accomplished teachers. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2007) described the financial and personal cost of failure to retain teachers: "Teacher attrition is high, with 46% of teachers leaving the profession within the first 5 years" (Holland, Eckert, & Allen, 2014).  Training teacher leaders is necessary for teachers to understand the informal and formal responsibilities of the teacher-leader role. Buchen (2000) argued that "the only leadership that will make a difference is that of teachers….They alone know what the day-to-day problems are and what it takes to solve them" (p. 35). Nappi (2014) cited the Wallace Foundation study (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010) findings that high student achievement was found in schools that valued input from all stakeholders, including teachers.

Training can encourage teachers' willingness to initiate positive changes in their schools. Teacher leadership programs must nurture the development of confidence and the desire of teachers to move outside their comfort zone and embrace the idea of exerting influence on school reform (Helterbran, 2010; Uribe-Florez et al., 2014).  According to Helterbran (2010), teachers must reject the "just a teacher" mantra (p. 363). Teachers must be leaders who identify the barriers to student success and take the initiative in overcoming the roadblocks.

The purpose of this research project was to identify themes that emerge from master's level teacher leadership program participants' self-reflection of personal and professional growth and perceptions of self as change agents who positively influence school environments. As a qualitative phenomenological research project focusing on the participant's perspectives of professional growth in knowledge, skills, and dispositions as a potential leader, this research will add to the understanding of factors that contribute to teacher leader training that can enhance student achievement, professional school environments, and personal and career satisfaction.

## Methodology

In our effort to understand how students in an online graduate Teacher Leadership program grew as teacher leaders, we agreed that we felt the final program reflection papers were a rich repository of qualitative data that we could access easily.   These reflection papers were existing data submitted by students as their comprehensive exam and had been archived in two places: (a) on the hard drive of one of the researchers and (b) on Tk20, an electronic database software (only available beginning at the end of 2012).  All three researchers had taught and/or graded the course at least three times, with two researchers having taught and graded the course numerous times across an eight-year period.

**Background of the Master's in Teacher Leadership Program**

In 2006, Lamar University's Teacher Education Department offered master's degrees in Elementary Education and Secondary Education. The number of applicants was small and the department faculty studied alternatives to these two programs that no longer attracted numbers to sustain the efforts. The studies in teacher leadership evidenced a promising trend indicating the desire for teachers to be involved in leadership roles, both formal and informal. Researchers indicated that the concept of teacher leadership addressed the isolation of the teaching profession offering an antidote to the ill-conceived phrase "I am just a teacher." Authors of the studies on teacher leadership indicated that training teacher leaders resulted in stronger student performance and higher teacher retention. Once the department members agreed to phase out the master's degrees in elementary and secondary education and to develop a master's degree in teacher leadership, members searched for a framework on which to build the program. At that time there were no explicit standards for teacher leadership. Program developers studied the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium Standards (InTASC, 1992) and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (2002), as well as many other documents and programs to write outcomes. It was decided that the master's degree in teacher leadership program would be offered online. Faculty members worked with instructional designers to develop interactive web-based courses. The first teacher leadership classes were offered in 2008. The program has maintained stable enrollment through the years. All three of the researchers have taught in the program and evaluated final portfolios. The growth and career development reflections were particularly intriguing and the researchers decided to use these documents to determine if the program was succeeding in developing teacher leaders. This qualitative study is one avenue for answering that question.

**Materials**

The documents that we analyzed were students' "Professional Growth and Future Goals" paper. This paper was one component of students' final portfolio, which served as their comprehensive examination for the master's degree. The review of the literature established the legitimacy of teacher leadership; however, resistance to the application of the concept was internal and external. In order for teacher leadership programs to have the impact on teacher recruitment and school reform described in the literature, teachers must grow professionally and develop confidence in their abilities as change agents.

The guiding questions for the Professional Growth paper were (a) Where were you professionally when you began your studies in teacher leadership? (b) How have you grown during the course of your studies? (c) Do you feel you have changed and how have those changes impacted you, your colleagues, and your students? (d) Where do you feel you are now in this journey? (e) In what areas do you feel you still need to improve? and (f) What are at least three goals you have for your future growth in the area of teacher leadership?

**Procedure**

We selected a random, stratified sample of papers, with an intention of analyzing 90 papers total: 30 papers for each of three categories (teachers in Pre-Kindergarten to 5th grade; 6th to 8th grade; and 9th to 12th grade), divided equally between three years (2010, 2012, and 2014). However, due to data availability constraints for the year 2010, we were only able to locate 5 papers for 6th to 8th grade and 7 papers for 9th to 12th grade. Therefore, we analyzed 82 papers that spanned grade levels and years in the program.

The papers were categorized and compiled anonymously by one of the researchers and then the documents were shared with the other team members. We employed a constant comparative method of analysis (Merriam, 1998), looking for words and phrases related to four start codes indicative of growth and change, which were the key focus elements of the final reflective paper: (a) how the students have grown professionally or in their careers; (b) in what ways they have seen themselves become a leader or a change agent; (c) what kind of leadership style they find themselves using or engaged in (authoritative, collaborative, etc.); and (d) what personal benefits they have accrued from their learning. We shortened these ideas to the following start codes: (a) Professional growth—career; (b) See themselves as a leader—change agent; (c) Perception of leadership style—change agent; and (s) Personal satisfaction—benefits to self. The start codes proved to be cohesive and accurately described the data, though we concluded that two additional areas of note were (a) participant response to the administrative leaders around them and (b) participant placing value on lifelong learning. Secondary themes under each of the start codes emerged and overlapped.

One researcher used NVivo software to complete her analysis and the other two researchers used highlighters on paper to complete their analysis. Results between the methods were consistent and were discussed at length in two data meetings attended by all three researchers, without significant disparities of interpretation. It was decided in these meetings that an analysis of differences in coding for participating grade levels would not be undertaken but possibly reviewed at a later time.

## Findings

There is a great need for teachers to take on leadership roles, informal and/or formal, for personal and professional growth and to improve schools. Internal and external impediments to teachers becoming leaders make the transitions from "just a teacher" to "teacher leader" difficult. Graduate teacher leader preparation programs need to assist teachers in developing confidence and professional identity as teacher leaders willing to be problem-solvers, change agents, and mentors who experience a high degree of professional and personal satisfaction.

### Perceptions of Professional and Career Growth

The largest number of responses was gathered under the start code indicative of growth and change in the arena of professional and career development. Further, this growth seemed to particularly situate itself within a new sense of (a) confidence and well-being as a teacher; (b) a better use of research and assessment to drive curricular and instructional decisions with a concomitant greater awareness of multicultural decision points; and (c) a deeper understanding of the relationship of the classroom and the classroom teacher to the school and the community. Evidence of each of these areas is discussed below.

**Confidence and well-being as a teacher.** One student stated, "For the first time in my career, I feel comfortable, confident and resilient in my profession as an educator." Another noted, "The journey has been motivating and I am a better teacher because of it." Another such general statement was, "Learning about new educational theories and practices has made me a more effective teacher over the past year and a half." Still another student wrote, "As I finish this program, I know that I have reached my goal of improved classroom instruction."

Other students elaborated on specific improvements in instructional knowledge and skills. One noted,

> My exposure to new ideas and information has made me a better teacher and more informed colleague. I am working to find new ways to provide authentic learning experiences for my students that will fit into my budget and utilize available resources.

An additional elaboration noted that "I feel that my learning through these courses has benefited my students as I have been encouraged to evaluate my own teaching more frequently and to assess the needs of my students and adapt more quickly." This factor of new confidence also extended to more complex teaching analysis and tasks as noted by this student:

> As a result of my studies and new growth in my craft, I am now more confident in my capabilities in my classroom. The current school year has been especially challenging for me. My students' needs both behaviorally and academically have been more varied and complex than my previous years combined. I have more students in RTI than previous years as well. However, through my growth as a professional, I feel more confident than ever when working with the parents on these complex student issues.

The remarks of these students clarified that their work in the Master of Teacher Leadership program formed the basis of a generalized sense of confidence that pervaded all of their teaching activities and actions.

**Better use of research and assessment.** In the realm of professional and career growth, results of this review of reflective documents indicated that students in this program perceived themselves to have a stronger and increased use of research and assessment to drive curricular and instructional decisions. Some of the reflections indicated a greater awareness of multiculturalist aspects of the teacher role:

> Before my studies, I was not sure how I should address specific needs in the classroom and at times I did not know what to communicate with parents. However, I now have much more knowledge about a variety of student topics and how to help remedy many issues students may face using sound, researched practices.

Other student reflections adopted this tone:

> I have incorporated more cooperative learning and inquiry-based learning in my classroom since I began my course of study. There is more authentic engagement by my students through the use of these strategies. I actually enjoy putting lesson plans together and sharing them with my team, where before it was just a chore that had to be done.

Other responses support the growth in instructional abilities:

> Participating in the courses for my degree has encouraged me to promote higher order thinking skills in my students….When my students are able to make connections between the concepts and real life they are more excited to learn the material and are more likely to create and answer higher level questions.

Several reflections evidenced increased understanding of the need for diversified instruction and sensitivity to educating special populations: "I have learned how to modify instructional practices for my diverse learners, including the students who are identified as gifted and talented, at-risk, and economically disadvantaged," one student noted. Another stated:

> The courses [in the master's program] that focused on student learning provided me with strategies to make my instruction more effective and increase academic achievement from all of my students, including those that require special education services and those that are academically gifted.

Another wrote:

> I have grown in the area of designing individualized assessments and…gained a better understanding of RTI, and the necessary procedures to implement it....I feel I have a better understanding of curriculum planning when applied to my grade level.

> Within this perception of professional growth as part of assessment and research as they impact teaching, the concept of multiculturalism arose. One student noted, "I want to be more mindful of how cultural diversity impacts my students and how they view the world. As a school district, we can strive to improve our multicultural curricula." Another noted, "it is my job to facilitate the growth of every student, but I must form meaningful relationships with them in order to increase their self-efficacy and levels of intrinsic motivation." On a more basic level, one student stated:

> I am more conscientious of the fact that all of my students are different and if I want to encourage them to be successful I must differentiate lessons and make accommodations in order to help build their self-efficacy. I am aware of the different cultures and the impact that a student's family life may have on their ability to succeed in school.

This linkage of research and assessment to a broad cultural awareness of factors contributing to student success is notable. It is in this growing understanding of the concept of culture that one hears the voice of emergent leadership.

**Deeper understanding of relationship of teacher to school and community.** Students in the master's program in teacher leadership indicated growth in extant leadership skills and willingness to find ways to strengthen their professional practice. One stated:

> I have become more aware of the complexities and inner workings that occur in my school on a daily basis.  I am also more aware of the roles that each faculty and staff member, parent, and student has on my campus.  I have come to realize that it is not just the teacher that influences the academic achievement of the students.  It requires collaboration between everyone involved and it takes cooperation and hard work in order to help every child achieve academic success.

Another stated that, "I provide a listening ear to my colleagues and provide assistance and support to new teachers and teachers who are new to our district…Welcoming new teachers…does play an important role in the continuation of school culture."  These remarks are characteristic of emerging leaders.

In this next excerpt, a student reflects on changes in attitudes that affect the day-to-day school life. "Everything that I do during the school day has a deeper meaning now, and I am no longer merely going through the motions until the 2:30 bell rings at the end of the day." This remark is important. It suggests that being a teacher without leadership training is akin to feeling like an automaton.  Such a sentiment is prevalent throughout all four start code areas we pursued in this research.

In addition, some reflections straightforwardly addressed the concept of professional growth as it leads to career growth. One reflecting student noted, "The courses that focused on school-wide issues, such as community involvement and learning communities provided me with the knowledge and skills necessary to assume more leadership roles that would help the school fulfill its mission…." In the same vein, another student remarked on personal changes resulting from the program activities:

> At the start of my studies in this program, I was not willing to share my challenges with other school administrators or teachers, because I felt that they would perceive me as incompetent. However, my feelings toward this have changed. I have found it to be useful to share my challenges or express my concerns with others on my campus that could provide me with adequate support needed to accomplish improvement in my professional growth.

The focus of this reflection is the teacher's own career. As noted earlier, "When teachers cast off the mantle of technical and managed workers and assume new roles as researchers, meaning makers, scholars, and inventors, they expand the vision of who and what they are" (Lieberman & Miller, 2004, p. 11).

### Self-Perception as Leaders and Change Agents

One can infer from some of the above excerpts around the students' perceptions of their professional and career growth that they are at times beginning to view themselves as change agents who positively influence school environments.  These perceptions seem to cluster around (a) being or (b) supporting a change agent, or (c) developing an affinity with formal leadership.

**Being a leader or change agent.** One student stated, "...my team members come to me more often for advice and questions about instructional practices than before I began my studies in this program. Therefore, I believe they view me as a different teacher as well."   Another student noted,

> I brainstormed with the PTA President on strategies to increase the PTA involvement of minority parents. I also became interested in serving the school outside of my classroom. I volunteered to serve on the textbook adoption and science improvement committees. I attended classes on a new writing program, and brought the information back to share with my team.

Students began to view themselves as leading change and being a changed person in the role as teacher.

**Supporting a leader or change agent**. Evidence of a desire and intention to develop other teachers as change agents or to support change agents was most prevalent. One student stated:

> One other goal I have identified is to support the administration in my building by offering to take on some of their responsibilities or to provide assistance as needed….They are so inundated with initiatives and projects, in addition to appraisals and other administrative duties.  Taking on some of the responsibility related to the campus improvement plan is what I am most interested in doing.  Because there has been a significant turnover in building administration for several years, our administrators are struggling.  Basically, they are new, their plates are full, and they need help.  Who better to help them than a teacher leader?

Another student noted, "One goal that I have moving forward is to increase awareness of the benefits of teacher leaders on our campus."  Similarly, another indicated, "My work will include supporting principals to develop teachers as leaders. Sometimes this happens within an instructional leadership team, sometimes it happens less formally." The students valued the emphasis the program placed on supporting others in a leadership or change agent role.

**Formal leadership roles.** Completion of a teacher leadership program designed for teachers wishing to remain engaged in the classroom has not meant that some of the students did not tap into a desire for formal leadership roles, but most of those statements have nothing to do with attaining the principalship. Far more likely is a statement such as this one, implying a connection with formal leadership, which retains the role of teacher: "Through this graduate program, I have gained an insight into the administrative duties and become proficient in the organizational process of becoming a department chair." Or, as another noted, "I am ready to get my feet wet in the field of leadership. I will be preparing to implement the mentor reading program for my campus over the summer and I plan on working closely with our librarian."

It appears that the Master of Teacher Leadership program allows for those completing the degree to resist the barriers noted by Barth (2007) and step into roles that somehow are not viewed as an encroachment on the work of principals. Thus, teachers with strong perceptions of self as leaders can look past the need for recognition, can sacrifice time and energy, and work around the often "severe, crippling impediments" to exercising leadership and improving their schools (Barth, 2007 p. 14). Is this new ability to overcome resistances found in the fact that the student can claim his/her learning in the program as the antecedent to his/her changed profile? Is it that others who are studying leadership empathize with people in leadership roles? These are worthy questions. Clearly, some change that students feel, and others see, opens doors for these students within themselves and in their work environments.

## Perception of Leadership Style

In analyzing perceptions among the participants concerning leadership styles, "a connection with formal leadership that retains the role of teacher within it" is a preponderant response. The following are some of the leadership actions that participants noted in their reflections.

**Participating in and conducting meetings.** The new ability to conduct and participate in meetings that promote teacher collaboration and leadership in others is one action that defined the leadership style these participants identify:

> As a grade level chair, I learned the most effective way to conduct a productive grade level meeting. I am more cognizant of discussing curriculum and educational issues rather than discussing business concerns. I make sure I include everyone and that everyone has an opportunity to contribute, as well as creating a safe environment where each teacher can speak freely.

Another writes, "I have been able to expand our purpose from simply participating in surface level conversations to meeting for collaboration in a professional learning community that improves instruction, assessments, and strategies." The ability to be comfortable with participating in and conducting meetings is reiterated by another participant:

> I believe participation in this program provided me with added comfort as I entered a new campus as their science specialist. I felt more prepared to facilitate department and grade level planning meetings in a constructive, collaborative manner, while also clearly defining my position as a leader.

Another urged,

> Exhausted with not having a team to work with, I put the idea of working more collaboratively on the table at the first meeting. Each teacher was able to put in her perspective of the situation to help come up with a plan to put an end to all the isolation.

The value of a facility with meetings is not only understood as a strategy for developing collaboration and fostering good will, but also a means of gaining recognition as a leader. One participant explained, "I believe showing proof of what you know is essential in establishing credibility among your peers."

**Relating emotionally.** The new leadership orientation of the teacher leader, communicating, meeting, and collaborating, addresses the frustration teachers feel when isolated from one another and not participating in decision making. One student succinctly stated this point: "I feel that my colleagues embraced the idea of decreasing isolation because they were able to take part in the decision-making process." Another noted, "The teachers are more receptive to change because they have input in the decision making process." A new awareness of the ability to meet, communicate, and collaborate as part of the decision-making processes is clearly implicated as a motivation for her colleagues' willingness to go along with her. These participants viewed their newfound skills as ways to lean in to the affective aspects of teaching rather than maintaining the stereotypical isolation of the profession.

Many participants recounted their new sense of emotional responsibility toward other teachers. A few such statements are listed here:

- "I had a responsibility to my team to hear their needs, take action, and let them know that I was part of them."
- "I have become a more nurturing teacher to those new teachers on campus and to my colleagues in my hall who depend on me daily."
- "At the beginning of my leadership journey, I had no idea what I was doing and would waiver quite frequently and lacked consistency. I also would take a hardline approach and not always listen and consider what my teammates had to say and how they felt about certain curriculum ideas or situations. This course taught me how important it is to provide the same support and feedback to your peers as you do your students."
- "I used some of the strategies that I learned in [one of the courses in the program] with my staff. I would leave them notes in their mailboxes to remind them that they are appreciated."
- "A new social/emotional IQ seems an outcome for these participants with a new sense of expertise with one of the cardinal hallmarks of formal leadership: the ability to lead a meeting and/or express ideas within a meeting."

**Advocacy.** The substantial leadership style we identified earlier and observed in these responses was "a connection with formal leadership that retains the role of teacher within it." In this set of coded responses, we noted this remark: "I am now much more understanding in my relationship with my administrators because I know about the different roles and responsibilities they face each day. Indeed, I see them differently than I did before I entered the program."

Besides identifying with and assisting administrators, advocacy for teachers arose in our coded response sets. This seems a likely result, given these participants value emotional accessibility to colleagues. One participant stated this value credo-style:

> Finally, I want to be an advocate for teachers…. I want to be the person a frustrated teacher can come to when they feel overworked and ineffective and take the burden off their shoulders…. I will serve as a mediator who will go to battle for them because I know how they feel. I will ask the questions they may be afraid to ask, and I will do my best to find the answers to appease their concerns.

We did see evidence of the spillover of these leadership styles into student outcomes as reported in the coded responses. One participant noted, "Our goal this year was to increase speaking in our classes and it has been achieved because we no longer work in isolation. Students have become more motivated and interested in learning another language." Another observed:

> The students I work with are more responsive to cooperative and collaborative groups. My students have been able to utilize each group member's strengths to put forth their best product and have also developed the mentality that they are a team working toward a common goal.

Whether there really emerged for these teachers a spillover effect into their students' work or whether they were simply far more aware of the dynamics of communication in groups is not clear and poses the need for the curriculum of this master's program to assess potential outcomes of the learning in the program to the outcomes in participants' classrooms.

**Personal Satisfaction – Benefits to Self**

The code responses we drew from this category were unequivocal. Students perceived personal benefits that arose as a result of their work in the program. Here are just a few of the responses that were fielded:

- "This may sound a little dramatic, but this program really helped save me and got me back on track, both personally and professionally."
- "My growth as a result of this program is visible in both my professional and personal life. "
- "This program kind of gave me my zest for life back and though it might sound cheesy, it truly gave me a sense of self and direction."
- "My self-confidence has improved as my knowledge increased."
- "I have learned how to better collaborate with colleagues, increased my self-efficacy as a teacher, become more optimistic and less pessimistic, increased my organizational/time management skills, and my motivation to be a life-long learner. I have learned that I am not in control of every situation and that there is always room for improvement."
- "I have learned much in this program and even more about myself. "
- "Throughout the course of this program I feel that I have developed into a much more confident teacher. This has proven to be true on a personal level as well. It seems as if this program has helped with my entire self-esteem."

Confidence, increased self-esteem, new ability to collaborate, increased executive efficiency, even new leases on life are touted as the benefits to self. Student self-reports suggested a positive program outcome in personal and professional growth and confidence in leadership skills.

## Limitations

Although we analyzed a large number of student reflections, the themes we found cannot be generalized to all teacher leaders. In particular, the outcomes of this study are in part a reflection of the Master of Teacher Leadership degree program as it was developed at one university and facilitated by the professors there. In addition, because we relied on existing data sources, we encountered some gaps of data, as explained in the Methodology section. Furthermore, because the data was existing and selected randomly, we do not have deeper, nuanced information from students or their feedback on our findings. Finally, and importantly, this study relied on data from only one source, the reflection papers.

## Discussion

Students' growth in a myriad of ways throughout the program is clearly evident in their reflections. Indeed, through their reports of increased confidence and ease as a teacher, they affirm the description of teacher leaders described by Khan and Malik (2013), Nappi (2014) and Uribe-Florez et al. (2014) as professionals who remain in the classroom and use their specialized knowledge and skills to improve achievement, influence others, and build organizational capacity. Moreover, the students' reflections demonstrate the importance for themselves, both personally and professionally, of learning new ideas and taking on new roles so that they do not become (or remain) stagnant and uninspired as teachers.

Most of the teachers in our study stated clearly that they did not want to move into formal administrative roles, but instead, they sought to lead from inside the classroom and be change agents as more knowledgeable teachers. Some of the participants even expressed an interest in helping their administrators by taking on some of their responsibilities. This potential dynamic relationship between administrators and teacher leaders is counter to the ideas expressed by Barth (2007) as barriers to developing teacher leaders. Perhaps the time really has come for teachers to be more than "just" teachers and to be true change agents on their campus.

This teacher leadership training program did exactly what Uribe-Florez et al. (2014) advocated: it built teachers' capacity to have more influence on the school systems, as well as nurtured the teachers' confidence (Bond, 2015). Furthermore, upon completing the master's program, teachers felt empowered to be change agents not only in their classrooms and at their grade level, but also throughout their schools and districts. In addition, they felt more comfortable seeking answers to new questions, as they help their schools and districts move forward. As one student summed up:

> Ultimately, I have realized what being a teacher leader is about. I know that neither I, nor any of my peers, will ever be a "perfect" teacher. I understand that I will continue to make mistakes and that there will be times when I do not know the answer. Yet, being a teacher leader does not mean that I know all of the answers; it simply means that I am willing to step up, acknowledge the problem, and seek the answers myself. With my peers, I am compelled to be honest, cooperative, and giving. Knowledge gained is not a treasure to be horded, rather as a teacher leader I am called to share. We build upon one another, share experiences, and gather wisdom to improve our ability to teach and to improve our schools.

This seems to be exactly what Buchen (2000) was envisioning when he stated that "the only leadership that will make a difference is that of teachers" (p. 35) who are knowledgeable and adept at solving the problems they face every day. Helterbran (2010) added "If it can be agreed upon that the spate of recent reform efforts has been largely ineffective, maintaining a culture where 'just a teacher' states of mind prevail is a terrible waste of expertise, energy, and influence in the school community" (p. 6). Preparing teacher leaders with the confidence to overcome internal and external barriers and the courage to break the culture of isolation can create a dynamic teaching force for the 21st century.

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