

Exploring Teacher Leadership in a Rural, Secondary School: Reciprocal Learning Teams as a Catalyst for Emergent Leadership

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The purpose of this case study was to examine how teachers experienced professional development as collaborative inquiry, and how their experiences contributed to their development as teacher leaders. Three overarching themes were identified through iterative qualitative analysis of multiple data sources including interviews, observations, participant reflections, and classroom artifacts. Through inquiry foci derived and developed in small learning teams, teachers were able to establish increased ownership and sense of agency towards change at the classroom and school level. The authors recommend sustained focus on (a) the emergent and fluid nature of teacher leadership experienced and fostered through collaborative inquiry; (b) attention to educators' personal and interpersonal social and emotional competencies as an important aspect of teacher leadership; and (c) how rural and/or small secondary school contexts offer and require situated leadership development opportunities. This case study offers the field illustrations of teacher leadership that challenge typology-oriented descriptions.

Keywords: teacher leadership; collaborative inquiry; rural education; professional development; educational change

Introduction

Providing learning environments in which teachers are supported in their ongoing professional development is essential for achieving school improvement efforts (Darling-Hammond, 2013). This research studied teacher learning within collaborative inquiry and examined capacity-building for leadership among team members. In this model, teachers are engaged in ongoing inquiry into their practice with the intention of improving student engagement and learning through job-embedded, continuous, collaborative, active learning. For the purposes of this study, we understood school improvement to be an ongoing practice of shared leadership among teachers and administrators for cultivating and supporting a culture of professional learning to improve student learning (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Mitchell & Sackney, 2011). We align with current understandings about the importance for school improvement efforts that seek teachers' active engagement in continuous collaborative inquiry (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Muijs & Harris, 2003; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Professional learning and teacher leadership are increasingly seen as synergistic aspects for school improvement. For example, we know from research on school effectiveness that the quality of instruction is linked to student achievement outcomes, and that, aside from student differences, teaching has the greatest effect on student learning (Hattie, 2003). For decades there has been an ongoing focus on how to build and sustain professional and pedagogical capacities within teachers (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2013). Researchers suggest that professional learning and development approaches can play a key role in the school improvement process when the

aim is to foster change in teacher knowledge, beliefs and attitudes that result in both improved classroom practice and the sharing of effective practices between educators (Borko, 2004; Fishmana, Marx, Best, & Tal, 2003). As schools are experiencing pressure to move beyond information transmission to engaging students in socio-constructivist learning experiences intended to foster students' adaptive expertise and lifelong self-regulated learning (Butler, Schnellert, & Perry, 2016; Dumont, Istance, & Benavides, 2010), improving teaching and learning means a focus on developing teachers' pedagogical competencies and habits of mind. Accordingly, professional development experiences beyond traditional workshop and conference experiences are required (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). While teacher professional development has been of research interest for decades, there has been recent interest in scholarship related to educational change and school reform (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Hargeaves & Fullan, 2012) alongside a growing interest in teacher leadership for school improvement. We bring these streams of inquiry together through our research on teachers' self-directed professional learning (Cherkowski & Schnellert, in press) to explore the fluidity between teacher leadership and collaborative professional learning.

In this article, we report findings from a two-year study of teacher inquiry teams in a rural secondary school (grades 8-12) with a population of less than 200 students. The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers' engagement in professional development (PD) as collaborative inquiry contributed to developing a culture of professional learning in the school. We have reported elsewhere on the findings from the first year of the study illustrating three of the reciprocal learning teams that formed through this learning teams initiative (Cherkowski & Schnellert, in press). In this article, we focus specifically on how engagement in reciprocal learning teams influenced the emergence of teacher leadership among the participants in this study. We argue that teacher leadership can both originate from, and orient towards, working productively with colleagues within professional development approaches aiming to enrich and grow teaching practices and environments in the service of increased student engagement and learning.

Literature Review

This study is framed within the research and literature on professional learning communities (PLCs) (Cherkowski, 2012; Little, 2003; Schnellert, Butler, & Higginson, 2008; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006) with a specific focus on collaborative and inquiry-oriented professional learning and teacher leadership.

Scholarship related to teacher professional learning has a long history in educational research with historical roots in the work of John Dewey, further developed as the notion of reflective practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Schon, 1983). Rosenholz (1989) and Ball and Cohen (1999) emphasized in their studies that professional learning happens on an individual level and an interpersonal level, setting the research stage for notions of PD as learning communities or communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Ball and Cohen's (1999) research indicated that teachers need to be provided with opportunities to engage in both self-reflection and collaborative activities. Feedback on teaching was also emphasized as an important component of teacher learning. Huebner (2009) suggested that, in light of the iterative process of teacher learning, "engaging teachers in thoughtful conversations about their practice, encouraging them to try out new approaches, and giving them ongoing opportunities to reflect on their efforts are important elements in supporting teacher learning" (p. 91). Horn and Little's

(2010) research on teacher talk related to professional learning and development highlights the need to provide teachers with time, space, and protocols for engaging in professional conversations, and guidance for moving these conversations toward learning that can lead to changes in practice. Too often in collaborative work, teachers engage in superficial discourse to make decisions or maintain collegiality, rather than an elevated discourse that fosters inquiry and agency (Lohman & Woolf, 2001).

Teacher collaboration has been linked to improved professional learning and student achievement (Butler, Schnellert, & MacNeil, 2015; Leonard & Leonard, 2003; Louis & Marks, 1998; Stoll et al., 2006). Collaboration provides feedback, new ideas, and increased opportunities for dialogue and testing out of ideas. In a large teacher professional learning study, Thoonen, Slegers, Oort, Peetsma, and Geijsel (2011) found, “the more teachers collaborated, the more they internalized organizational goals and the more they had a tolerance for uncertain situations, which in turn seemed to lead to a greater engagement in professional learning activities” (p. 514). Kwakman (2003) found that teacher learning is significantly enhanced through collaboration, and in particular, through attention to structural elements such as self-organized subgroups and meeting protocols that allow for interaction and reflection among teachers. Designing professional development initiatives as *collaborative inquiry* can lead to improved professional learning for teachers and can position teachers centrally in change efforts.

Key elements of collaborative inquiry centered on student outcomes that make a difference to teacher professional learning include: learning that happens in context (in the school); job embedded in nature (built into the school’s schedule); and teachers’ ongoing, active learning (Butler & Schnellert, 2012; Chappuis, Chappuis & Stiggins, 2009; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Collaborative inquiry-oriented PD places responsibility for continuous learning in the hands, hearts, and minds of teachers as leaders (Gabriel, 2005; Whitford & Wood, 2010).

Harris and Muijs (2004) frame teacher leadership as agency that empowers teachers to lead development work with their colleagues. In other words, teacher leadership is not a prescribed position or set of roles, but vision and action that emerges out of perceived instructional or organizational need. Further, the teacher assumes the role of leader based on a perception that they are well positioned to serve a need at that particular time, for that particular context. Lieberman and Miller (2004) proposed that teacher leaders have a unique role to play in reshaping school cultures from individualistic environments to communities of professionals. Research on teacher leadership has documented several waves of scholarship (Pounder, 2006; Silva, Gimbert & Nolan, 2000) with the first describing teacher leadership as a managerial role, with designated formal roles for teachers in school improvement initiatives designed to improve student learning (Barth, 1987). This understanding of teacher leadership has been criticized for maintaining the hierarchical power structures that result in more work and increased time demands for teachers, but with no increased salary or amended work schedule to accommodate the new responsibilities (Silva et al., 2000). Recognizing that many teachers did not want to leave the classroom to practice leadership, the second wave of research on teacher leadership reflected a shift towards understanding the importance that teachers placed on their instructional roles and their desire to stay close to students, while still wanting to influence school improvement (Stone, Horejs, & Lomas, 1997). A third wave of teacher leadership research emerged as a hybrid model of both formal and informal instructional leadership roles for teacher leaders in the school (Gabriel, 2005; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Muijs & Harris, 2003; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Within these models of teacher leadership, teachers assume formal and

informal roles that build on their reputations as instructional leaders to work with and influence colleagues toward improved practice. Thus, there is no single definition of teacher leadership (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009).

Research and writing on teacher leadership for school improvement recognizes the importance of establishing shared or distributed leadership among the school for improved student learning, and that this tends to happen as teachers are involved in both the structural and the instructional directions of the school (Gabriel, 2005; Harris & Muijs, 2004; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). Elmore (2004) described teacher leadership for school improvement as “more a function of learning to do the right things in the setting where you work” (p. 73). However teachers in many systems have few opportunities to engage in continuous and sustained inquiry into their practice in the settings where they actually work, nor do they get effective input on practice (Timperley et al., 2007). Harris and Muijs (2004) argued that the notion of teacher leadership resonates so strongly with school improvement narratives because both hinge directly on the development of collegial relations that positively challenge teachers to improve their practice.

Although providing a definition of teacher leadership continues to be a challenge given the ambiguity of the role (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009), our review of teacher leadership and professional development literature suggests that teacher leadership is an intentional stance taken to positively influence others toward collective improvement of educational experiences. In our study we aimed to learn when and how teachers took up this informal but intentional stance of teacher leadership—working to cultivate a culture of professional learning within collaborative inquiry. For teachers to feel invested in these inquiries, they need to define the area of practice to be addressed and feel empowered to learn through the development and sharing of new knowledge (Butler et al., 2015). Here, we offer a case study of PD that begins from teachers’ own questions related to teaching and student learning, and how this may disrupt traditional notions of PD and teacher leadership. As we will describe, the entire staff of this one small secondary school agreed to engage in longitudinal, collaborative, and situated inquiry-based professional development, and we saw this as an opportunity to (a) learn about how teachers can assume ownership of and agency related to their learning and practice, and then (b) learn how this situated PD learning initiative provides insights into how, and if, teachers feel engaged and empowered to assume leadership beyond their classrooms.

The Study

Background

This study took place in a small, rural secondary school in central British Columbia over the course of two school years. At the time of this study, the first-year principal was new to the school. The principal connected with us, knowing our research interests in school improvement and collaborative, inquiry-oriented professional learning (Brown & Cherkowski, 2011; Schnellert & Butler, 2014). The school district was, and is, undergoing significant shifts to embrace more inquiry-oriented teaching and learning in their schools. The province was revising its curriculum to re-orient teaching and learning toward inquiry, place-conscious, and personalized learning with a strong focus on social-emotional learning, creative and critical thinking, and inclusion of First Nations principles of learning, across all aspects of curriculum. As well, the principal was tasked with finding ways to keep the school viable (with a desire to provide a strong and educational experience for their students) despite decreasing enrollment in

this small, rural secondary school. We worked with the principal and lead teacher of the professional development committee to plan out the inquiry teams initiative that we called reciprocal learning teams. With this name, we aimed to signal to the teachers the importance of valuing the learning that can happen from and with each other. We aimed to facilitate and support reciprocal learning emerging from the educators' inquiries focused on how to improve teaching and learning for their students in ways that responded to the particular needs of their context.

Within the changing educational landscape in the school district and the province, the school's relatively stable staff consisted of teachers who had been at the school for 15 years or more combined with a small, constantly changing group of teachers on temporary contracts. After meeting with the authors of this article in June of the previous school year, they agreed to move ahead with a collaborative, inquiry-based model of professional development (PD). At the September staff meeting we introduced research to explain the reciprocal learning teams collaborative inquiry approach (Cherkowski & Schnellert, in press). We worked with educators during staff meeting time that was repurposed for reciprocal learning teams. It was hoped that the teachers would carry out their inquiries with their reciprocal learning teams between meetings.

At the first meeting, the teachers brainstormed possible inquiry foci; these foci determined the teams that they worked with throughout the year. This was an unfamiliar process for teachers. We spent the majority of the first meeting facilitating conversations with groups of teachers about the kinds of topics they might be interested in pursuing, how they might work together with their colleagues, and possible structures and routines for ongoing inquiry and reflection.

The teachers went away from that first meeting with the task of finalizing inquiry topics and teams to be ready to dig into the inquiry process at the next meeting. The topics that were brainstormed ranged from (a) learning about how to plan courses for "passion blocks" such as outdoor education, ballroom dancing, fly fishing, and weightlifting to (b) topics about pedagogy, such as how to implement project-based learning to (c) school reform questions such as how to organize timetables for maximizing student choice. The teachers eventually settled into five groups of three to five teachers. The topics included student engagement in elective courses, designing courses for more student ownership and self-directed learning; project-based learning; re-organizing the library as a learning commons (the librarian who worked with the vice principal); and a group of classroom assistants and one special education teacher who met each time to inquire into various issues and concerns that had emerged between meetings. We facilitated these bi-monthly learning team meetings during repurposed staff meeting time following a similar process (the five teams sharing examples of actions taken, time for planning next steps, large-group sharing time).

Methods

We aimed to gather a thick description of teachers' experiences participating in a collaborative inquiry approach to PD, and so we used case study method (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2003). Although all 18 teachers participated in the inquiry teams, participation in the study was voluntary and 14 gave consent to participate. Each inquiry team meeting lasted 60 -75 minutes, and took place during time normally allotted for staff meetings. Data were collected through researcher observations, procedural facilitator documents completed by each team, and individual interviews.

We designed a procedural facilitator to help focus conversations, empower teams to document progress, and plan future steps in their inquiries. Each team photocopied their procedural facilitator at the end of each meeting. At the end of each meeting, we debriefed with each other about the progress we saw with the teams, concerns we thought needed addressing in following meetings, and looked through the procedural facilitators to notice themes, comments, and questions that emerged for the teachers. We used this formative assessment information to guide the development of further meetings. In addition to our observations from meetings, and the data provided by the teachers through the procedural facilitators, we carried out open-ended interviews (Patton, 2002) with nine participants in the spring of the first year, and six in the second year. Interviews lasted between 20 and 40 minutes and were transcribed word for word. The transcribed interviews were analyzed in an iterative process of coding, categorizing, and abstracting data as outlined in research for conducting qualitative, interpretive research (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To ensure confidentiality, participants selected a pseudonym for use in the transcribed data, and all identifying information was removed from the transcripts.

Transcripts were read and coded by both researchers and a research assistant. Keeping in mind our interest in learning more about how participating in this collaborative inquiry-oriented approach to PD may have influenced an emergence of teacher leadership, interview transcripts were read and coded at an individual level using open-coding, and then analyzed and coded at a level of comparison to identify emergent patterns. We then read across all the transcripts with an eye for comparing and contrasting the codes, which led to collapsing codes to form categories and then themes. We then used the codes derived from the interviews for analyzing the teachers' written reflections in the procedural facilitators. Finally, all themes were compared and contrasted with the theoretical framework underpinning the design of this study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Findings

In this section we provide themes derived from data analysis related to participants' experiences of teacher leadership within a collaborative inquiry approach to PD. We read the data with the lens developed in our literature review: teacher leadership as an intentional stance to positively influence colleagues towards collective improvement of educational experiences. The interviews were the most substantial source of data. We report here on the question: In what ways did teacher leadership emerge through PD as collaborative inquiry? Several categories emerged via the first two rounds of coding (i.e., supporting each other, feeling of making a difference, motivated to make a difference, getting more teachers involved, involving students in leadership, taking action, making plans, teams deriving own focus, relevance, meaningfulness,

self-directedness). Re-reading data in relation to these categories, as represented in Table 1, we collapsed them into three overarching themes: (a) Strategic action (e.g., making/carrying out shared plans); (b) Ownership (e.g., deriving a focus, relevance, meaningfulness); and (c) Agency (e.g., feeling of making a difference, motivated to make a difference, sense of contribution).

Table 1.
In What Ways Did Teacher Leadership Emerge through Collaborative Inquiry?

	<u>Strategic Action</u>			Deriving a focus	<u>Ownership</u>		<u>Agency</u>	
	Making plans	Making change	Carrying out plans		Relevance	Meaningfulness	Feeling that you make a difference	Motivated to make a difference
A		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
B			X			X	X	
J	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
H			X			X		
I	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
M	X	X	X		X	X		
Be			X			X	X	X
K		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
S	X		X		X	X		
E	X					X		

Note. The first column lists the teacher’s first name (pseudonym used) as an initial.

Theme 1: Strategic Action

For the teachers in this study, having an opportunity to plan their own professional learning based on the needs of their students was a new experience. They indicated that they appreciated the opportunity to make and set plans for their professional learning. All interviewees reported plans they created together and actions they took in relation to their inquiry topics. For many of them engaging in these strategic actions contributed to a shift in mindset about professional learning and shared leadership for change in schools. One level of strategic action illustrates classroom teacher leadership as iterative cycles of setting goals, making plans, taking action, reflecting on actions taken, and adjusting efforts based on student feedback. Across many of the interviews, the teachers spoke in depth about their efforts to develop their practice and how their shared focus on student engagement and/or learning, and the support from and sharing within their inquiry team, empowered them to make goal-oriented, strategic, innovations in their teaching. For example, Helen, a science teacher, spoke about how working as part of her collaborative inquiry team helped her to step back from the frenetic pace and multi-tasking of the school day to reflect on and change her practice. She credited her increased capacity, in part, to finding a common pedagogical interest with her inquiry group, and noted the

importance of her group's collaborative reflection, mutual support, and strategic action. She explained,

[collaborative inquiry] allows you to have the opportunity to think past the day-to-day existence, you know. So rather than being worried about, "Oh I need to photocopy this for tomorrow," or, "I need to get lab stuff prepared because I have a lab tomorrow," you're thinking more holistically...you're looking more at your teaching practices rather than your day to day stuff. (Year 1)

One of the more reticent teachers in this group, who did not sit for an interview in year one, shared that while it took time to embrace the reciprocal learning team approach to PD, it supported him to explore ideas and practices that renewed his engagement with teaching,

As much as you like to do the same thing all over, and comfort and all those sorts of things, you do get into a rut and it does get kind of humdrum after a while if you keep doing the same old, same old. So [working with my inquiry team we] came up with some new things and inject[ed] some ideas... it doesn't take much to start bouncing things back and forth. "You can try this..." or "Well that sounds kind of good, I never thought of that," and it sometimes can snowball into something cool and create something kind of different. (Eddy, Year 2)

At a second level, data analysis revealed how teachers' collaborative inquiry led to schoolwide actions. For instance, the work of one reciprocal learning team required the recruitment of most, if not all, teachers in the school to rethink how they engaged—at the school level—with students regarding course planning. This began with the team deciding that course selection for the next school year should be interactive between students and teachers. Jake explained,

So that was a very successful discussion between the four of us saying, "You know what? We're not really seeing the kind of engagement we want because they are passively listening to us talk about courses that they're not interested in. Why don't we try something different where they go to the person they want to talk to?" It worked out well. [We] pulled everything together within a week and think the response was positive from everybody - teachers and students. (Year 1)

These schoolwide efforts were a significant trend across teachers in the data. Nine of the 10 teachers interviewed referenced these schoolwide efforts—whether they originated in their reciprocal learning team or became a focus for them at a later date. Each of these efforts required the team to create a shared plan and then recruit or influence others to join them in carrying out these plans. For most teachers this was a new aspect to their role as an educator. One reciprocal learning team created a survey to find out from students what teaching practices were engaging, what aspects of their courses were meaningful, and what they wanted in and from school. This seemed to be an exciting and humbling experience for these teachers as they learned that many of the pedagogical approaches they used in their classrooms, and their school's structures, felt outdated, generic, and/or arbitrary to students. This group's emerging shared leadership helped them to both transform their practice and school structures in tandem. They supported one another in accepting student feedback as constructive, and used it to adapt their classroom

practice, redesign their courses and environments, and transform the school's timetable for the next year. 9 of the 10 interviewees specifically highlighted plans made and actions taken through the learning teams process, and how they were able to make successful and beneficial changes to their teaching and/or school.

In the second year of the study, the learning teams reflected on how to engage in more flexible, responsive, student-directed approaches to teaching that were being driven by school-wide changes in the timetable, learning spaces, and course offerings (e.g., retractable walls between classrooms, inter-disciplinary teaching teams, and large blocks of scheduled time for student-led inquiry projects). Kate reflected on how she noticed a shift in her colleagues' mindset and ability to take strategic action,

...at the beginning, especially with this new system, [I heard], "I don't know how I'm going to do this," but [now] they're doing it, right? And they're making it work. And yeah, they may still be stressed out at times, but they're doing it, and they're making it work. And that's a huge shift. Getting out of the, "I can't, it won't work," to the, "Well it's happening..." (Year 2)

By the end of the second year, we noticed growth in how the participants were thinking about their role in engaging with others in ongoing school improvement, as the teachers started to see themselves in the role of a leader with their colleagues. For example, Adele described how she now saw herself as responsible for moving the work of the group forward,

If I get articles I will photocopy, give it to everyone and say, "hey let's read this".... Once we get started I'll send an email out and say "hey, let's get going. Do you want to meet? Is there a day you can meet? Let's go and get a jug of beer and sit around and talk." And so I would take initiative to do that. (Year 1)

After two years of engaging with her colleagues in ongoing inquiry work, we noted that her thinking about leadership had shifted significantly. She now had an expanded view of leadership. She described how she took on a larger role as a leader with her colleagues. Her strategic action included connecting with people in her district who could help her develop more skills related to group facilitation. She then started working with teachers between reciprocal learning team meetings to help them grow their practice. When asked about the informal leadership role that emerged from her work with her inquiry team, she shared,

I had time to learn it, and that was the big difference. It wasn't listening to someone show me and then maybe get an hour to try it.... Because of our change in system here, to me, it's an important part of making successful change. So I maybe spent more of my own time on it as well. I felt like I had to find the time at the expense of other things. And that's why then I felt confident to take on a leadership role. (Year 2)

Theme 2: Ownership

Ownership was the second theme derived from our iterative analysis of data, surfaced by all 10 interviewees. Participants offered examples of how the collaborative inquiry approach to professional development made PD more relevant and meaningful to them. Their comments highlighted how they experienced a shift from top-down to self- and co-regulated PD. As noted earlier, participants had opportunities to brainstorm inquiry topics that they perceived as meaningful in their classrooms. Similarly, inquiry teams were actively engaged in making decisions about the practices they would explore on their own or together in order to achieve goals. Megan explained this well, “rather than going and sitting and listening to something that has no bearing to yourself, you can actually look and say, ‘Okay, what do we need, what do we do?’” (Year 1). Similarly, Betsy noted, “So it was exciting to know that we get to be in charge of our Pro-D. Because that’s a new thing” (Year 1). Megan articulated how an inquiry team approach to professional development fosters ownership and leadership, “the one shot wonders of Pro-D, the ‘go and sit and get the injection’ ... drove me nuts from day one.... But the inquiry has put it back saying, ‘Okay, now I have some control over what I do’” (Year 2).

According to the teachers, a key element that fostered collective ownership in their PD was having a shared focus, a common goal. Data analysis also revealed, however, that collaborative inquiry approaches to PD take patience and time. Descriptions across the transcripts highlighted how the time to arrive at a common topic not only engendered shared ownership, but also helped to value and include staff who were isolated due to their role. This can be true for any number of diverse reasons in a small, rural school. Brainstorming, discussing, and narrowing their shared topic took several months for some groups, but this process nurtured collaborative ownership. Irene noted that it was,

...maybe February on, where we’ve really kind of nailed it and been like, “oh, we can really take action and do things now.” I think because we had to come about it in our own way it became more meaningful to us. And if somebody had just told us that we were going to establish a timetable to increase student engagement we would probably say, “What does that have to do with student engagement?” So it kind of took us this long to figure out. (Year 1)

While taking time to formulate and commit to an inquiry was reported as central to teacher learning, investment, and success, teachers also reported that attention to a common goal over time made a difference. Helen found that having a shared goal, one that was holistic, complex, and layered made a difference, “Well I think it allows you...to look at something holistically, it allows you to get excited about the whole thing rather than just excited about what you’re doing in your own little classroom” (Year 1). Similarly, Irene found that a shared goal helped teachers to sustain their engagement with their inquiry focus and each other,

The time that we were together, we were always discussing things that were really valid. Maybe not that narrow, but we were always discussing what things [students] would like and trying to figure out how we could get the kids to grab onto that. (Year 1)

Having a shared goal provided inspiration to keep moving forward when setbacks were experienced, and a feeling of everyone moving in their own way toward a common goal. Megan described,

You can still contribute, you can still bring things, and share things and, so it's almost like, in a way, most of the school is participating in the same thing even though we've gone off in little groups, we still come back to talk about it. (Year 1)

For these teachers, sustained inquiry into topics of importance to them ultimately provided the time and space for developing ownership of goals and actions to bring about change in their classrooms, and in their school. In Betsy's words, "having the ability to positively influence the school culture, student engagement? That's prime. I appreciated it" (Year 1). Bobby, saw a parallel between self-directed, inquiry-oriented professional development and inquiry approaches to student learning,

This is what we're trying to do with the kids nowadays, trying to let them pursue their passions right? It's a great idea. Previous Pro-D has always been a one day stab at something that somebody wants you to do and you may get a little bit out of it but you usually forget about it pretty quickly. It's not very effective. (Year 1)

Kate shared a similar sentiment about this initiative providing a sense of ownership in her work, "I think [teacher-directed inquiry] gives you freedom to be passionate about something" (Year 2). She later went on to say,

We get to choose what we're actually interested in, and I think the likelihood that we are going to implement something that we're actually passionate about is huge. We can listen to all of the talks we want, but if we're not invested or passionate about it, it's not going to change our practice at all. (Year 2)

Theme 3: Agency

We were curious to determine if teachers developed and communicated a feeling that they were making a difference for their students, and for their colleagues, as they engaged with each other in the learning teams to improve their teaching and their school. We called this feeling of making a difference and a motivation to make a difference, *agency*. Six of the 10 educators (Adele, Betsy, Irene, Kate, Bobby, and Jake) who sat for interviews described an increased sense of feeling like they were making a difference. Some referred to a sense of agency for being able to make a difference at the classroom level. Bobby spoke about how he noticed that he was making a difference in student engagement through his use of project-based learning, which was his inquiry topic with his learning team. He shared,

I was astounded how 50- 75% of them really spent a lot of extra [time on it]. I could tell they spent a lot of extra time really researching their poems and analyzing them and really thinking about them, and re-reading them over and over again, which is exactly what you want them to do...I was really surprised at how much work a lot of students put into it and I really enjoyed it. One of the most enjoyable things I've spent marking in a long time. (Year 1)

Kate spoke about her motivation to make a difference. She related that in the past,

You have the unit, and it's great, but you never push yourself to change it or get new things. Where[as] now, we're starting up something from nothing. We don't know how we're going to approach these kids coming in, so it's something that we're very, very interested in, and we want to make it work. (Year 2)

Her increased confidence to innovate at the classroom and school level was evident as she described,

Give it a try, right? We're not going to screw it up, we're not looking at any ideas that are going to screw up a student, right? ...The reward could be such a bigger payoff than the risk. So why not try it? (Year 2)

The teachers who talked about feeling that they were making a difference in the change process often did so with reference to actions their learning teams took that spanned across classrooms and had an impact at the school level. For instance, Jake came to see the impact of his actions and collaborating with others made a difference, "The second example was how we did our course selections...it worked out well. I felt really positive about that. I mean, it's amazing what you can do" (Year 1). Betsy felt that she was making a difference at the school level, "the stuff that our group's working on, I feel like is legitimately going to improve the school, hence our work environment and connections with kids. So for me, it's totally beneficial!" (Year 1). Irene felt empowered and looked forward to addressing challenges as they presented themselves, "Excitement for the year to come. It makes me more excited for next year...I can see it, we can solve all of those issues" (Year 1). Kate talked about schoolwide investment in one another as colleagues,

[We became] invested in all of the other teachers and what they're doing as well, right? Because we all have things we're trying, and we're trying to improve our practice and improve the experience for the students in some way. In that sense, all of our inquiry groups are the same. So we're all trying to improve ourselves to improve the experience of students. So I think that has made the connection deeper at some level. Because that way we're all on the same page. No matter how different our styles are, no matter how different our personalities are, we all have that same thing. Which is neat to be with a group of teachers where that's their goal. Other stuff gets in the way, daily stuff gets in the way, but deep underlying it? They're here to provide the best experience for the students. (Year 2)

Other teachers talked about what increased their agency,

I think the key is twofold. The one is clear purpose and direction, collegiality, and time. Those are the factors, right. Because if you're just sort of left on your own, you may not have or feel more of that obligation and that also was inspiration to do things as well. Motivation to get things done. (Jake, Year 1)

Adele talked about the inquiry team approach as the catalyst for her growing sense of agency, “I mean it was Pro-D, but not in the traditional Pro-D [sense], and so that also helped build my confidence” (Year 2).

In our analysis of teachers’ reported increase in agency related to their reciprocal learning team focus, we saw the import of teachers having a voice in determining goals, inquiring into practices to meet the needs of learners in their contexts, and sharing and supporting one another. They felt that they were making a difference at both the classroom and the school level.

Discussion

In this section, we take up three overarching contributions from this research that emerged from and resonate with the findings: (a) collaborative inquiry as a PD approach that calls forth teachers’ leadership capacities; (b) how attention to educators’ personal and interpersonal social and emotional competencies is an important aspect of teacher leadership; and (c) how rural and/or small secondary school contexts offer and require situated leadership development opportunities.

This case study offers the field illustrations of teacher leadership that challenge typology-oriented descriptions. Rather than just identifying teacher leaders within the study and describing their leadership style or how they grew in their leadership capacity, we most significantly found that a collaborative inquiry approach to professional development offered all staff opportunities and entry points to develop as leaders. We observed how working in inquiry teams that defined their own focus for professional development, teachers developed ownership of and agency for both pedagogical innovation and school change.

Smylie, Conley, and Marks (2011) note that “even though the idea of teacher leadership has been around for quite some time, our thinking about its form, its function, and its role in school improvement has evolved considerably” (p. 267). They suggest that new possibilities for teacher leadership to influence school improvement initiatives might exist within the notions of teacher research, models of distributed leadership, and self-managed teacher teams. We agree that finding new ways to think about teacher leadership can open spaces for new understandings about how teachers’ sense of confidence can grow through ongoing collaboration with their colleagues in self-directed teacher inquiry teams, and that this boost in confidence can serve to ignite a sense of agency for change both at the school level and within their classrooms. As we found with the participants in our study, the opportunity to develop new skills and capacities as a member of a collegial inquiry team provided a space for professional growth that led to the increased confidence needed for many of them to emerge as leaders co-constructing organizational structures designed to improve student learning. The emergence of teacher leadership was a fluid experience that flowed back and forth between the classroom level and the school level in terms of engaging in change practices. For some, working with colleagues to plan and carry out organizational changes provided the assurance and desire to initiate changes in their own teaching practices, due in large part to having a shared goal and collective accountability. For others, starting with their teaching practices gave them the opportunity to delve into pedagogy and related change literature in new ways that contributed to an increased understanding of connections between these approaches, student engagement, and the design of learning environments and school timetables. This attention to their practice in relation to student engagement, supported by their inquiry teams, contributed to their interest in school-level change. The shift in desire for engaging in ongoing improvement in their practice was an

incremental one, a tentative interest in trying out new practices that was nurtured with the ongoing and regular support of their inquiry team members.

Overall, we found that opportunities for teachers to develop a sense of leadership for engaging for ongoing school improvement emerged in a variety of ways through the inquiry team process. This reflects and Muijs and Harris' (2003) findings from their overview of the research literature that teacher leadership has been described as leadership of students or of colleagues, of operational tasks, or of decision-making. Additionally, we learned through this case study some of the reasons for what Muijs & Harris (2003) called teacher leadership empowerment, the conditions and structures that foster and support teachers taking on leadership in different ways. All 10 of the teachers described three aspects of support necessary for ensuring the success of the reciprocal learning team initiative. They talked about the importance of support from administrators, from us as facilitators, and from each other to ensure sustained success. Administrator support included encouragement and support to take risks in their work and to repurpose staff meeting time for inquiry work. All the participants reported that the support from us, as facilitators, was an important element in the perceived success of this initiative. They described that the routines and structures we provided for them during inquiry team meetings gave them a sense of direction and process as they learned to work together. Finally, a commonly shared challenge for all of the participants was the difficulty of carrying out collaborative inquiries with colleagues in a small, rural secondary school where educators are responsible for many extracurricular and administrative duties that might otherwise be shared among a larger faculty in bigger schools. Yet, they credited the support they felt from each other within and later across inquiry teams for their increased capacity to plan and carry out new practices, and take ownership of, and feeling agency toward, making desired changes in their school.

Supporting and encouraging educators to delve into teacher leadership opportunities, whether in the classroom or at the school level, requires attention to cultivating learning communities in schools that foster and support the social and emotional learning needs of teachers as they engage in what can feel like daunting and risky work. We found that teachers were more successful in collaborating with colleagues to examine their practices and innovate their teaching for the purposes of improving student learning when they took the time to discuss and explore potential directions, engaged in classroom observation, and then returned to their group to unpack underlying concerns and factors related to the potential direction of their inquiry. At this point they were often able to agree on a focus (e.g., student engagement) that required them to take action, but also allowed them to approach their inquiry in multiple ways. Maintaining their focus over time, engaging in cycles of goal setting, planning, strategic action, and reflection, built both their confidence and their comfort with one another—a seemingly symbiotic relationship. The participants repeatedly noted the importance of the administration for encouraging and supporting their ideas and inquiry processes, and for maintaining designated time during the work day for collaborating with their colleagues as essential to sustaining their interest, enthusiasm, and commitment to this initiative. Irene vividly described her experiences of taking on more leadership roles in her work,

They say that teachers will only last 3 years in leadership because it's huge. You do every assembly, every school event, every community event, like it's never ending, and so I've been struggling all year with this, just like completely stressed with it and I said, 'this can't be leadership, you know?'

Irene's description is a stark reminder of the need to ensure appropriate supports are in place for teachers to ensure social and emotional health is maintained as they take on leadership roles.

For these educators, inquiry teams became the safe space within which they could develop new skills and capacities for improving their teaching, for learning how to work with colleagues in a leadership role, or both. As Thoonen et al. (2011) found in their study of professional learning, participants' experiences in our study reflected how meaningful collaboration opportunities with colleagues can provide teachers with opportunities for developing confidence and increased self-efficacy that cycles back into engaging in further learning opportunities. Supporting teachers to engage in the kinds of risky learning that is often needed to challenge themselves and grow professionally takes sustained time, something that is rarely afforded to teachers in their work. It also takes support and encouragement to develop social and emotional learning skills and capacities that enable them to work productively with their colleagues to improve their practice. Findings from this study highlight the need for ongoing research from a social-emotional learning lens to conceptualize this aspect of professional development for teacher leadership. As the teachers in this study reminded us, developing a learning teams approach to professional development can lead to educators' ownership of, agency for, and strategic action towards school improvement.

Finally, we know that context in education is important. What we learned from our participants' emergent teacher leadership experiences is that the context of a small rural secondary school requires them to engage in their work as teacher leaders in different ways than might be typical for teachers in larger urban schools. In rural communities, teacher leaders must be attuned to their community's interrelated geographic, economic, and social contexts. These rural educators and their school faced funding issues connected to declining enrollment, a resource-based economy with fluctuating returns, and had to carry out more informal leadership tasks that their counterparts in larger schools and centers within and beyond their school district. Yet similar to this study, Anderson (2008) found that these factors in a rural secondary school offer fertile ground for the development of teacher leaders. As these schools are smaller, they are able to transform structures quickly. With fewer formal leaders in rural schools, administrators who embrace "the school improvement process [through] a professional learning community model [can] transform the decision making relationships allowing teacher leaders to change their school" (Anderson, 2008). We found that rural school transformation was not only closely tied to professional development approaches that enabled distributed leadership, but that rural communities require and develop teacher leaders that inquire into and respond to their local context.

We cannot assume that the roles, responsibilities, support for and development of teacher leadership will happen in the same way for all teachers or for teachers in rural versus urban schools. Yet, this study suggests that within research, place-conscious awareness of how teachers attend to context within, with collaborative inquiry can enrich our understandings of what it means to support teacher leadership and for what purposes. While large-scale studies can and do provide more generalizable understandings about how teacher leadership is lived out across many schools, we see the need for more detailed portraits of relational, emergent teacher leadership, such that fostered in this case study, to provide the particular images that might reflect for others what teacher leadership could look like in their work and in their school.

Conclusion

Through our work with the educators in this study, we have come to understand the fluid, and emergent nature of teacher leadership and educational change in schools. We described how through their engagement in ongoing, embedded, teacher-directed collaborative inquiry, they described a sense of ownership and emerging agency for contributing to change in the school, and that this ownership and agency was applied at both the classroom and the school level. There were many different access and entry points for teacher leadership through this reciprocal learning team initiative, and we saw how teacher leadership emerged. Leadership took many forms and was responsive to the particular needs of students and colleagues in this small, rural secondary school. There was no one-size-fits-all description of leadership that we could tease out of this example. And, as we came to learn more about the leadership experiences of these educators, we noticed that their experiences were, by virtue of their context and school culture, particular to their school. Documenting particular stories is an important contribution to building a more comprehensive knowledge base on teacher leadership research and practice.

Pounder (2006) suggests we may be in the fourth wave of research on teacher leadership, where teachers are engaging in work that reflects transformational leadership in their classrooms. We appreciate the need for continuing to study the role(s) of teacher leadership for the purpose of supporting and developing leadership among many—in fact all—teachers. We also see a space for research and practice that moves the work of teacher leadership beyond role and function to instead attend to teachers' ownership of and sense of agency toward contributing to improving education for all students, whether that be at the level of classroom, school, or both. Understanding teacher leadership as fluid and collaborative strategic action, and moving forward pedagogical and structural change within a learning organization will look different across many contexts. Yet, encouraging, and then supporting teachers in all stages of their career to engage meaningfully with their colleagues toward improving student learning is, in itself, important leadership work for teachers, with teachers, and by teachers.

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