

Teacher and Administrator Perspectives from Experiences in the Teacher Leadership Initiative

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Teacher leadership has been defined by researchers as the catalyst for change, and the impetus for school improvement. In this study, the researcher investigated the experiences of teachers and administrators who participated in a nationwide teacher leadership pilot, the Teacher Leadership Initiative (TLI), and the effects that this yearlong event had on leadership, school improvement, and teacher and administrator professional practices. Unifying outcomes from the participants included changes in thinking about leadership that directly improved professional efficacy, collaborative and leadership skills, and a new sense of identification as a leader that was not experienced before the TLI.

Keywords: teacher leadership, educational leadership, teacher education and professional development, educational Assessment, evaluation and research.

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Teacher leadership was a pivotal component that emerged from the era of educational reform beginning with *A Nation at Risk* and exaggerated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 as an answer to educational improvement. As related by Katzenmayer and Moller (2009), legislation was influenced heavily by extensive reports for improving schools and put educators at the forefront of accountability for student achievement. In addition, Katzenmayer and Moller (2009) described:

Massive reports on how to improve schools influenced policy makers to pass legislation to put pressure on educators to provide quality education for all students. Few disagree with this goal. Many would argue, though that the goals cannot be accomplished by simply raising standards, creating and implementing more outcome measures, and holding students, teachers, and administrators ever more accountable for test scores. (p.2)

The requirements of the NCLB Act of 2001 were a challenging feat for schools and districts to overcome with the reality of bringing every student regardless of prior background knowledge, socioeconomic status, and level of English language proficiency up to the expectations that were dictated by the law each year. Schools and districts with limited resources before the revision of the law in 2015, were seeking all solutions to the problems of students not meeting proficiency levels. Interventions and strategies for improving student proficiencies for schools and districts, began to focus more on meeting the requirements of the law and not about improving student learning and realizing academic success for schools.

Principals of schools not meeting proficiency levels, found themselves looking toward the mandates of the law instead of focusing intently on improving student learning for all students within schools and districts. Accountability measures were imposed on district leaders as well, solidifying these leaders' efforts toward meeting the expectations of the law for schools and districts instead of creating a sustainable plan for system-wide improvement. Developing and implementing strategies for school improvement requires time, resources, and consistency. Smaller school districts lacked in resources and retention of highly skilled personnel to support the changes needed to improve student learning district wide.

Research on the impact of the accountability movement (Darling-Hammond & Prince, 2007; Wechler et al., 2007) revealed that investing in teachers and their learning, rather than creating more tests is a better investment for improving student outcomes. Utilizing "excellent teachers as effective change agents to improve student learning through teacher leadership" can have a "measurable, positive effect on students, schools and the teaching profession" (Coggins & McGovern, 2014, p. 16) if teachers are given the opportunity to lead. The literature encompassing the concepts around teacher leadership has grown in substance since the 1980's with the emergence of standards and accountability in educational circles (Lai & Cheung, 2015). Leiberman and Friedrich (2010) and York-Barr and Duke (2004) reported that, over the past two decades, expectations for teachers have changed to include a role in improving education at the school level not just at the classroom level. Teacher leadership is not a new concept for teachers as they lead learning daily in their work to improve student academic abilities and encourage student success. What many teachers have not been exposed to or experienced is leadership outside the classroom in which they may lead initiatives to improve professional learning for their peers, create events that target specific strategies for improving teaching and learning for groups of students, and lead plans for advocacy of teacher quality and advancing school improvement.

Opportunities for teacher leadership exist in the form of "school improvement teams, teacher instructional support groups and teacher-led advisory councils" (Smylie & Brownlee-Conyers, 1992, p. 150). These roles for teachers propose that leadership involvement include all

participants in the school community (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2001). In addition, literature associated with education change abounds with evidence that supports the pivotal role that school principals play in the process toward adoption of new practices and innovation in schools including shared leadership between teachers and principals (Bossertm Dwyer, Rowan, & Lee, 1982; Deal, Peterson, 1990; Fullan, 1991; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982).

As asserted by Smylie and Brownlee-Conyers (1992) and contextualized by Berry, Smylie and Ekert (2016), literature suggests that new working relationships between teachers and principals exist and can provide the components needed for changing educational practices and improving schools. These relationships are complex and require many different factors for success and involve the social and normative dimensions of schools including organizational structures and contexts that promote leadership outside of traditional school leadership and involves teachers leading outside the classroom.

Teacher leadership has been utilized to improve teacher knowledge and capacity in P-12 school districts and higher education programs. Examples of school districts that have implemented teacher leadership initiatives include the District of Columbia (D.C.), where schools attempted to recruit and retain talented individuals. D.C. Public Schools implemented a Teacher Leadership Innovation pilot with the purpose of the development of new teacher leader roles using the strengths of the most effective teachers. For this new role, teachers worked with principals and designed specific roles for the teacher leaders geared toward the needs of the school. D.C. school administrators had already improved their teacher evaluation system, which included a career pathway for high-performing teachers with increased recognition and compensation, so the teacher leadership initiative was a natural event following those changes. Denver Public Schools similarly focused on building teacher capacity to increase leadership in teachers (Curtis, 2013). Denver Public Schools used their system of collaborative culture that was already in place to implement the Differentiated Roles pilot program where Team Leads spend one-quarter to one-half of their time as teachers outside the classroom to observe, coach and manage teams of teachers. Administrators were consulted when deciding to implement the initiative to give schools the opportunity to use this pilot to best serve each individual schools' needs (Aspen Institute, 2014). Universities across the country including Mount Holyoke in Massachusetts created paths to teacher leadership at the master's level by offering a master's degree in teacher leadership. At Mount Holyoke, students enter a twenty- four month program to attain a Master of Arts in Teacher Leadership. In this program, the Teacher Leader Model Standards are utilized along with the teacher leader's personal plan for leadership from the classroom school, community or beyond (Mount Holyoke College, 2016).

\ The problem of practice in this study focused on: determining how a teacher leadership initiative affected leadership in schools; how a teacher leadership initiative improved schools; how teacher leadership experiences informed the practices of both teachers and administrators and changed the way these educators thought about what it means to be an effective educator. The conceptual framework for this study is based on an extensive review of literature on teacher leadership and the researcher's personal experiences with leadership in the classroom and beyond. The conceptual framework suggests a theory of action for investigating the effects of teacher leadership on teacher and principal leadership; school improvement; and teacher and principal professional growth in practice. Theories and concepts that support the emergence of teacher leadership include transformational leadership, cognitive perspective, reflective practitioner, subjective educational theory (Van der Berg, 2002), Vygotsky's concept of the zone (Gordon, 2009) and constructivism. Embedded in the development of the teacher leader is the direct

connection to constructivism. Constructivism allows for the individual to derive meaning from an experience through the close examination of the experience increasing the individual's capacity to grow and learn yielding new thinking about teaching and learning in the context of the experience. Through participation in the Teacher Leadership Initiative, teachers engaged in just such a change in goals and thinking about improving leadership, schools, and the educational profession like they had not experienced before this initiative.

Teacher Leadership: Definitions, Expanded Roles, and Benefits

In their iconic investigation of teacher leadership, York-Barr and Duke (2004) stated that the purpose of teacher leadership as the improvement of teaching and learning and increasing student achievement for all our nation's students through a "process by which teachers individually or collectively influence their colleagues" (p. 288) as individuals, in teams, and organizations. Teachers who assume positions of leadership within schools and districts are often categorized into formal and informal positions of leadership. Formal positions are often designated from the building or district leadership and include lead teachers, department heads, and subject area coordinators or facilitators and gain respect through these assigned roles (Lai & Cheung, 2014). Professional norms of isolation, individualism, and egalitarianism challenge the emergence of teacher leadership when teachers are formally placed in these roles. Teacher leaders often feel conflict as their relationships with their peers shift from horizontal to hierarchical (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Informal positions of leadership for teachers described by Lai and Cheung (2014), are those created by teachers for the specific purpose of improving the instructional and cultural environments through collaborative efforts to strengthen teaching and learning practices. As related by York-Barr and Duke (2004), informal teacher leaders receive their respect from students and colleagues through their knowledge and expertise.

York-Barr and Duke (2004) discussed, "Expanded teacher leadership roles range from assisting with the management of schools to evaluating educational initiatives and facilitating professional learning communities" (p. 235), expressing that teacher leadership involves teachers leading at all levels not just from the classroom suggesting new leadership roles for teacher leaders. Curtis (2013) related that, "Teacher leadership recognizes the talents of the most effective teachers and deploys them in service of student learning, adult learning and collaboration, and school and system improvement," (p. 4). As reported by Curtis (2013), reasons that school districts may pursue teacher leadership initiatives are:

- Further developing top talent;
- Helping other teachers improve;
- More effectively implementing key priorities, like Common Core;
- Building a pipeline to the principalship;
- Distributing leadership in schools;
- Increasing highly effective teachers' impact on student learning;
- Making principals' span of supervision manageable. (p. 4)

In addition, Coggins and McGovern (2014) stated, "Effective teacher leadership improves teaching and learning outcomes and gives teachers a voice at policy making at all levels" (p. 15). The most consistently documented positive effects of teacher leadership are on the teacher leaders themselves, supporting the belief that leading and learning are interrelated. Teacher leaders grow in their understanding of instructional, professional, and organizational practice as they lead. Less empirical evidence supports student, collegial, and school-level effects (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

In Tsui's (2009) study, he revealed that outstanding teachers engage in discovery and exploration in teaching and learning, in problem solving, and in activities that expand their abilities in teacher leadership roles. As described by Lumpkin, et. al., (2014), teacher leaders act as transformative agents and collectively share their specialized knowledge with colleagues, expertise, and experience to help broaden and sustain school improvement efforts. Silva (2000) suggested that teacher leaders indulge in change efforts and improve their practices as they practice purposeful collaboration with their peers, which stimulates positive professional relationships and encourages teacher learning and growth by challenging the status quo. As teachers engage in collective inquiry with other teachers in collaborative environments, a sense of transformative practice and deeper understanding of the pedagogical practices of teaching can emerge as elaborated by the work of Berry, Smylie and Ekert, (2016), "The work of teaching can be the work of leading and the act of learning to teach can be the act of learning to lead" (p. 16). Van den Berg (2002) reported the professional development of teachers is successful (Franke, Carpenter, Levi & Fennema 2001) when the teachers themselves determine the problems and then create the solutions.

In Muijs and Harris' (2007) research, they described teacher leadership as "increased teacher participation in decision-making, and opportunities for teachers to take initiative and lead school improvement" (p. 113). Hunziker (2012) added that teacher leadership is teacher leaders working collaboratively in a professional community, learning, and growing professionally, and revealing the elements of professionalism. Utilizing teachers as leaders in the quest for educational improvement is a natural solution as without teachers facilitating instructional practice in schools, learning would be greatly impaired. Incorporating a systematic approach to solving school and district problems is often unique to the districts that are pursuing teacher leadership initiatives. Ryan (1999) suggested that teachers who participated in leadership experiences exhibited more confidence in their abilities, worked more toward helping their peers and were more apt to provide challenge to students that they taught which correlates with Bandura's concept of self-efficacy and building the human capacity of individuals. Building capacity in people in any profession requires that individuals develop a belief in themselves, and that belief helps them to actualize their dreams and goals. Finally, Taylor, Goeke, Klein, Onore, and Giest (2011) report that Greenlee (2007), Muijs and Harris (2006), and Taylor, Yates, Meyer and Kinsella (2011) conveyed that teacher leadership has been referenced to be the answer to the improvement of schools, retention, the democratization of schools.

School Reform and School Improvement

Are teacher leaders a pivotal and sustainable reform strategy for improving schools? Can teachers leading in schools and districts bring about organizational change and innovate learning practices? Horning and Loeb (2010) reported that traditional instructional leadership emphasizes building administrators practicing the work as "instructional leaders" of the building and describe a new emerging leader prototype (p.66). The new prototype noted by Horning and Loeb (2010) was outstanding teachers that use their exceptional knowledge of teaching to impact student learning and improve schools. This shift from teacher leadership from within the classroom to beyond the classroom recognizes teacher leadership is an integral part of the collective power of the school for educational improvement (Lai & Cheung, 2014). Additional findings in the study by Lai and Cheung (2014) revealed that teacher leaders extended their influence even beyond their schools as they networked with teachers from other schools engaging in inquiry to find solutions to curricular

and pedagogical problems. As teachers worked together in a collective manner with common situations, they were able to exchange ideas and resources relevant to their needs increasing their capacity for improvement of classroom practices.

Barnett Berry founder and CEO of the Center for Teaching Quality spoke of a bold new teacher: Teacher + Entrepreneur = Teacherpreneur (Berry, Byrd & Wieder, 2013). In this hybrid role, teachers assumed leadership positions without leaving the classroom. School districts provided for teachers to assume these hybrid roles to increase teacher knowledge and capacity, impact student learning and improve schools (Berry, Byrd & Wieder, 2013). Teacherpreneurism was not just about growing classroom experts, but about finding solutions to problems that can redesign archaic educational systems (Berry, Bryd & Weider, 2013).

Democratic Practices, School Culture and Climate

Transforming teaching practices and improving teacher competency requires that teacher leaders be empowered to develop change efforts. Empowerment of teachers to transform and maximize the learning in the school community is recognized by Bolin (1989) who stated that, a democratic and cooperative environment is essential and begins with the administrator who understands that success of the school and depends on teachers and other school personnel for implementation. In addition, Bolin (1989) asserted that, “teachers need to be able to exercise their craft within an organization that they have helped to shape” (p.8).

In a more recent study, Kilinc (2014) reported finding, that “school climate is a significant predictor of teacher leadership” (p. 1729). Demir (2015) revealed that school administrators are responsible for creating an environment that builds trusting relationships and at every opportunity and encourages teachers to collaborate and try new ideas to support innovative leadership. Building strong cultures that support teacher leadership requires that school leaders participate ongoing attempts at developing trusting relationships. Trusted relationships are created over time in grade level, schoolwide, and district team meetings and activities that require teachers and administrators to work together to achieve goals that are developed together toward improved schools and student learning. Kilinc (2014), reminds us that teachers did not move into leadership roles when restrictive school environments were present hindering the quality of the interactions between the school community members. “One of the marks of an effective leader is not only the impact that they have on the bottom line of student achievement but also equally how many good leaders they leave behind,” (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 134). In his book on highly effective teams, Kirtman (2014) relates that, “effective school leaders build teams in their schools and develop trust and confidence with their staff to achieve results. They tend to use trust and motivation instead of discipline, rules, and punitive approaches to get results” (p. 6).

Shared Leadership Roles

York-Barr and Duke (2004) disclosed models of school leadership as instructional, participative, distributive, and parallel. They added that these models are more inclusive of the concept of teacher leadership and must emerge from many individuals within an organization and not simply a handful of formally recognized leaders. Hallinger and Murphy (2013) related that a pivotal step to change from a single leader to shared leadership is formally sharing responsibilities between administrators and teachers. This sharing of leading learning allows a “powerful approach to changing the normative environment in which instructional leadership is enacted” (p. 16). Sharing

leadership roles and responsibilities can increase the capacity development in an organization. Kotter (1996) stated that a key change factor for organizations is building capacity through a shared vision, common goals and language, team structures, and uniformity of teaching practices. York-Barr and Duke (2004) suggested that the probability of a successful teacher leader is greatly enhanced if the roles and expectations of the teacher leader are developed with the teacher leader, their peers, and the principal with instructional improvement as the goal. Barth (1990) conveyed the significance of sharing leadership (Spillane et al. 2007) to engage others in formal and informal leadership roles to reframe instructional leadership where administrators and teachers develop a joint identity sharing duties of the organization. A shared leadership structure within the school and district can promote teacher and staff efficacy and yet needs to be fostered through professional learning initiatives. Wilhelm (2013) described building and district leaders as staff developers whose role required them to model professional learning for teachers and staff so that eventually teacher leaders could assume these leadership roles. A change in thinking shared by a teacher leader from Wilhelm (2013) described the requirement of a fundamental shift in the role of teacher leader to a shared role. Although the literature reveals shared leadership practices to be essential in improving schools, intentional and systematic efforts to support the capacity of teachers and principals to share in aspects of school leadership appeared to be severely lacking (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Also lacking was the skill level of teachers required for shared leadership roles in schools. In addition, Wilhelm (2013) reported that most teacher preparation programs do not provide teachers with the skills to implement shared leadership which included leading other teachers in analyzing student achievement and facilitating and locating research-based strategies to improve instructional practices and increase student learning

Inquiry Methods

The purpose of this qualitative study using a descriptive multiple case study approach was to examine the reported effects of the participation in the Teacher Leadership Initiative (TLI) on leadership, school improvement, and teacher and administrator professional practices through the constructed perceptions of the teachers and school administrators who participated in the pilot. The purpose of this study was achieved through an intentional research design that included: the careful review of the research on teacher leadership over time including current initiatives; semi-structured interviews of teachers and administrators who participated in the TLI; and data collection and analysis methods that answered the research questions.

The Teacher Leadership Initiative was a three-year pilot promoting teacher leadership implemented through a partnership between the National Education Association (NEA), the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), and the Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ). The participants in this study were a sample of 8 classroom teachers, and 4 school administrators from the states of Ohio, Iowa, Mississippi, and Montana who participated in an eleven-month leadership initiative conducted in three phases comprising: (a) the development of innovative leadership skills, (b) exploration of a content strand that matches an interest of the teachers, and (c) the planning and execution of a capstone project (National Education Association, 2016, f). The National Education Association (NEA) served as the gatekeeper for this study and provided access to the participants. Participants selected in this study were teachers and school administrators who were engaged in the TLI in years one, two, or three of the pilot. All teachers were active members of the National Education Association teacher's union. Initial themes from the data revealed that the teacher participants appeared to be from a select group of

educators including a state teacher of the year, three National Board Certified Teachers, and local NEA union presidents. All teachers and administrators in this study served students in schools with diverse student populations and low socioeconomic status. Teacher participants included six females and two males with teaching experience ranging from six to twenty years. Two teachers were elementary educators and six were secondary educators. Administrator participants consisted of two males and two females with administrative experience ranging from six to twenty years and included one district level administrator and one former school principal who worked for the Mississippi Department of Education at the time of this study. The school administrators in this study supervised the teacher participants during the TLI and gave support to their respective teachers as needed throughout the year-long pilot.

The understanding that teacher leadership is situational and dependent on the context or teacher role is central to the TLI leadership model. Additionally, the TLI model was based on the NEA (2014) competencies of Instructional Leadership, Policy Leadership, Association Leadership, and Overarching Competencies. This initiative created by the NEA, NBPTS and CTQ gave teachers an opportunity to participate in a field-based experience for teachers and allowed them to choose between three structures of teacher leadership:

- Instructional Leadership-which placed teachers in the center of supporting and improving teaching and learning in their schools and districts;
- Policy Leadership-which ensured that experienced and accomplished teachers inform and influence policy making decisions at the local, state, and national levels.
- Association Leadership-which prepared current and future association leaders to include advancing the profession of teaching and the professional interests of members into the union advocacy agenda. (NEA, 2014, p. 2)

The teachers in this study were given, first the opportunity to use their leadership skills outside of their classroom to participate in a leadership event, then supported by the NEA, NBPTS and CTQ through local, state, and national cohort meetings for professional learning which targeted their development as TLI teachers. Additional support for implementation was given through their individual school's leadership or school district leadership as well as peers in their schools and with other teachers in TLI in other states.

During the first phase of the year long TLI experience, teachers worked to develop innovative leadership skills through improving teacher knowledge, dispositions, and abilities directed toward leadership. Teachers worked in collaborative activities that informed them about teacher leadership. They worked as a group to create ideas about transforming teaching and learning for the teaching profession (NEA, 2016d). Teachers then chose one content strand to explore further in a Capstone performance project and included these components:

- 1) Common Core in which participants learned strategies for Common Core implementation and leading their colleagues in this endeavor;
- 2) School redesign in which teachers developed the knowledge and skills to co-lead the design of new schools with an emphasis on teaching excellence, 21st century skills for college and careers, and teacher-powered approaches;
- 3) Social Justice in which teachers were equipped with resources to effectively engage with teaching colleagues, policymakers and community members on social justice and related topics; and
- 4) Teacher Evaluation in which teachers were equipped with resources and skills to effectively engage with teaching colleagues, policymakers and community members on teacher evaluation and related issues of policy, research and technology. (NEA, 2016e)

Teachers in this initiative chose one area from the three structures and developed a capstone

project much like a master's level thesis project. Findings from the interviews reveal the capstone project was not just a paper written to finish a degree completion but described an actual change in their practices as classroom teachers. This experience took them to a different level of thinking about teaching and learning, leadership, and what it means to be an effective educator because it was a project that they chose to improve teaching and learning and was unique to each individual teacher. It was not a task given to them by an administrator, it was truly the teacher seeing a need for improvement and then taking the opportunity along with the responsibilities and making it happen.

Research Questions

1. How do participants experience and understand teaching and learning differently after participating in the Teacher Leadership Initiative?
2. How do participants experience and understand leadership differently after participating in the Teacher Leadership Initiative?
3. How has constructed understanding about what it means to be effective as an educator changed after the Teacher Leadership Initiative?

The use of a descriptive multiple case study approach allowed inquiry to be used to discover and then described through reporting the specific actions of people, their beliefs and interests in this study (Erikson, 2011; Ratvich & Carl, 2016), along with the criteria established by Berry, Smylie and Ekert (2016) to note whether the criteria actually promoted teacher leadership and the subsequent action of teacher leadership and its effect on teachers, students, schools and school districts.

Research Instruments, Data Collection, Data Analysis

The National Education Association purposefully connected the researcher to the teachers and school administrators that participated in the Teacher Leadership Initiative Pilot. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format, were iterative, and evolved after each interview at the teacher level and administrative level to allow for the questions to give a clearer and more in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences. As participants were interviewed, the understanding of what was important to know about the participants' experiences in the TLI and how that affected their thoughts about teaching and learning, leadership, and what it means to be an effective educator changed. The interview questions became less generalized and more focused on the essence of this teacher leadership experience and how it impacted their lives as teacher leaders and administrators as well as their peers, their schools, and their school district.

Interviews were conducted by using zoom.us, an online video chat recording service and through recorded voice interviews due to geographical constraints between the researcher and the participants. To determine the consistent themes from the data, personal documents produced by the study participants are included in this study and gave a useful window into the thought processes of the individual, made a connection to the research questions, provided context to the study, and served to explore meaning from the participants (Ratvich & Carl, 2016). A *Capstone* project of a teacher participant along with a local newspaper review of the TLI added to the validity of the study and gave in-depth insight to the participants' lived experiences in this study.

The interviews were transcribed through trint.com, an online transcription service which allowed the upload of video and voice recording files. The files of each of the 12 participants were

revised through trint.com for accuracy of the wording and conversation during each interview by the researcher. Member checking was used with the participants after the initial revisions to the transcription to ensure that the transcribed interviews reflected the actual interview questions and responses. The interview timeframe with participants was conducted from October 2017 through December 2017.

Data analysis was iterative and recursive using an integrative approach. As data were collected over the duration of the study from the participants, it was combined to incorporate criticality into the process (Ratvich & Carl, 2016). Continuous formative analysis as well as summative analysis utilizing the transcriptions from the semi-structured interviews, and field notes from additional qualitative documents were used to review and refine the study. To determine the consistent themes from the data, the transcribed interviews were read and reread, and recorded reflection memos from each interview were revisited. This review also included the written notes from the interviews and field notes taken from additional questions sent via email to the participants post interviews. Data triangulation allowed for the assimilation of information from a variety of sources including the semi-structured interviews with transcriptions and qualitative documents, which included multi-media providing evidence of the participant's lived experience with the Teacher Leadership Initiative. Data triangulation combined multiple perspectives taken from individuals and supported a coherent justification for emerging themes or theoretical perspectives increasing the validity of the study (Creswell, 2014)

Using a *first cycle coding* strategy, the participants were sorted into demographic categories of: (a) teacher or administrator, (b) years of service and elementary or secondary, (c) level of education achieved and prior work experiences other than education, and (d) other current educational pursuits such as National Board Certification. Next, I added and sorted the following additional characteristics to deepen my knowledge of the teacher participants: (a) risk taker, (b) other teacher leader experiences, (c) supported by administration during TLI, and (d) highly involved with NEA. These initial coding strategies helped me to gain insight into each individual participant as a professional educator and allowed me to understand their prior and current experiences with teacher leadership. These methods also improved my ability to recognize the themes as they emerged from the data and how they were associated with these participants. Initial themes from the data revealed that the teacher participants appeared to be from a select group of educators including state teachers of the year, National Board Certified Teachers, and National Education Association local union presidents. These teachers, individually and as a group were highly skilled in the craft of teaching as depicted by their involvement with local, state, and national initiatives yet they were seeking something beyond the classroom to fill their need to impact teaching and learning.

When first cycle coding was completed, I used *Structured Coding* strategies, which allowed me to fully reorganize and categorize the data based on thematic, conceptual, or theoretical relationships to develop smaller more manageable themes for interpretation (Saldana, 2016). Through this strategy from Saldana (2016), I created a "Top 10 List" which extracted the ten "quotes or passages" that were most representative of the study utilizing the responses from the teachers and administrators and allowed the major themes to emerge.

Major Themes and Findings

The major themes that transpired from the data collected were: (a) Participant Characteristics: Teachers and Administrators, (b) Teacher Participation in TLI: Overall Purpose, Goals and

Personal Goals, (c) Preparation for Teacher Leadership: Teachers and Administrators, (d) Support for Teachers in the Teacher Leadership Initiative (TLI), (e) Changes in Thinking about Teaching, Learning and Leadership: Teachers and Administrators, (f) Improvement: Teachers Efficacy and Confidence as Teacher Leader, (g) Outcomes of TLI: Impact on Teaching, Learning and Leadership, and (h) Overall Impact of TLI: New Opportunities, Professional Growth and Facilitating Teacher Leadership. Each teacher's experience and their perspectives as well as the administrator's experience and perspectives with these teachers as they completed this journey is documented in the seven major themes that were extrapolated from the data. The organization of the findings was depicted through the themes with a summary of the findings from teachers and administrators followed by questions that directly related to the theme and the responses from teachers and administrators. The questions allowed a better understanding and connection of the importance of the themes to the study. Some responses did not have a direct question but reflect the findings related to the theme. This use of *Thick Description* allowed an accurate and thorough account of the contextual factors clearly describing the participants' experiences in the interviews to produce more complex interpretations and findings (Ratvich & Carl, 2016). Teachers and administrators were given pseudonyms for their responses in the findings. The themes also provide a connection to the foundational purpose of the Teacher Leadership Initiative delineated by the NEA, NBPTS and CTQ which states that TLI is a "product of our shared vision of teacher leadership advancing the profession." (NEA, 2014, p.2)

Results

All the TLI teachers in this study revealed gaining in their leadership skills and ability to lead others in their schools and districts. TLI teachers reported elevated efficacy and pedagogical skills from this experience. They also revealed that the TLI had a positive impact on the learning of other teachers and their students through the implementation of their individual projects. Individual projects included three teacher mentoring programs; improving teacher leadership at the building level; expanding the development of the local teacher's union; and improving classroom assessment and writing using technology at the school and district level.

The TLI gave these teachers the formal opportunity to lead teachers, schools, and districts in a project that was directed toward improving teaching and learning of their own choosing, not directed or influenced by administration. These teachers developed their projects, like most highly accomplished practitioners, toward impacting students and teachers, not toward personal gain. What they did not foresee when they took on the TLI experience, was the changes that occurred in their own personal beliefs about leadership, improving schools, and professional practices. As reported by the TLI teachers in this study, an awakening of their inner self as a *leader* not just a teacher emerged. A strengthened sense of self-efficacy and knowledge that their ideas and hard work were revered and appreciated by both colleagues and administrators came to the surface, as they created and implemented their projects. As teachers were put directly in roles of leadership, they became cognizant of how their expertise could be utilized in a manner that impacted professional practices at both the school and district levels.

Additionally, after TLI, many of these eight teachers were afforded leadership opportunities at the state and national level. TLI teachers stated that they believed the new opportunities were due to their advancement in leadership skills from the TLI experience. What was incredulous to me as the researcher was the fact that, only four of the TLI teachers considered themselves teacher leaders before this experience. One of the four that did not consider himself a

teacher leader before the TLI, was a state teacher of the year and had thirty-six years of experience. This teacher had many opportunities to work on committees, be a department head, and taught at a local university.

Until the TLI experience, he did not realize the effect that his expertise could have on improving teaching, learning, and the promotion of leadership in his school district. When asked about how participation in the TLI changed the way he thought about teaching and learning as related to teacher leadership or leadership in general, and his relationship with his school administrator, he gave me this response:

Yes. Revolutionary. Light bulbs. Fireworks. I was just happy to be a teacher with National Board Certification. I am making a difference that way. I bettered myself and I'm better for my students. This one, I can better the profession and I can help others to better themselves too. The principal, you usually think in your school and my traditional sort of thinking, is your school leader. Now, I realize that I too am a school leader. So in that way, I did talk to him differently. I could converse with him differently. Now whether he realized, maybe he didn't see the difference, but in my head, I was talking on a different level.

This teacher had experienced many professional conversations with this administrator before TLI, but felt that because of the TLI experience, his capacity to have a conversation at the leadership level increased significantly. Through the process of the Teacher Leadership Initiative, this teacher now identifies himself as a teacher leader. As reported by Sinha and Hanuscin (2017) from their study on teacher leadership, the development of the *teacher leader identity* is a process that requires a continuous and sustained effort to support the individual teacher's needs through this process. In addition, the progression of the teacher leader identity is highly influenced by teacher's "views on leadership, opportunities to lead, feedback and recognition during leadership activities, reflection on growth as teacher leaders and sustained support" (Sinha & Hanuscin, 2017, p. 358). Sinha and Hanuscin's (2017) case study results in respect to the development of the teacher leader identity, show a definite similarity to this case study. TLI teachers gained in their teacher leader identities as they engaged in professional learning about leadership in collaborative venues and then were able to practice their strengthened leadership and collaborative skills through the implementation of their capstone project. As the teachers began to identify themselves as teacher leaders, they also acquired indelible qualities associated with being a teacher leader that other teachers without this experience and realization do not possess. Each teacher in the TLI came to realize their teacher leader identity from their own prior experiences and opportunities with leadership, feedback with recognition from peers and administrators and through continuous reflection on their evolving leadership practices during the year-long event.

To summarize, the *teacher leader identity*, though a complex phenomenon, is a level of conscious expertise, skills or qualities that can be associated with the term *teacher leader*, just as the association of the qualities or expertise of a Biologist is analogous to a scientist. Although the TLI teachers demonstrated these traits through their professional skills and practices, the findings revealed that the TLI experience extended that confidence and efficacy to a new plateau. When the TLI teachers lead their projects, a new understanding of what teachers can accomplish as leaders transpired. They saw themselves as leaders among others as never before, and as one teacher said,

Yes, and it gave me an appreciation for how hard leadership roles really are. I mean they are hard and you've got to navigate the minefield somewhat. It was a confidence builder and made me want to get other people involved and yeah, you need to step up because we all need to step up. I was really grateful for that. I didn't even know I wanted that.

The findings from this study and the research depicted in this study reveal that teacher leadership initiatives improve teaching and learning. Teaching and learning are improved through the advancement of the teacher in leadership, collaborative, and pedagogical skills and in efficacy and confidence as they internalize this process and fully realize the identity and potential of the teacher leader (Sinha & Hanuscin, 2017). TLI teachers were given support for developing leadership, collaborative, and pedagogical skills while building efficacy and confidence during the year-long process, and one teacher revealed:

So I got to talk to people all over the nation when we did our collaboratories and it was good to have that. Expansiveness that I wouldn't have gotten otherwise. They gave it to you, was like oh my gosh, there's so much rich stuff here. There's so much really cool stuff that I didn't even know about because I'm sitting here thirty years in the school system.

In addition, school administrators that participated in the study also depicted changes in teachers due to TLI, as one stated:

Well I think that the overall experience was really, it was really good. I think it was powerful for these teachers to be able to collaborate and start learning about and talking about leadership within their ranks. And I think was probably beneficial for everyone. And it was exciting to see them excited. I think that them taking on that role without knowing that they have to do the principal job that they can do this stuff and still be effective in the classroom and still have that relationship with the kids and still do that but also influence their colleagues. I think that was really awesome. The qualities and skills affirmed from the process of this teacher leadership event acquired by the TLI teachers, are qualities and skills that all teachers from novice to accomplished should be exposed to throughout their careers to improve the learning in schools and districts, and depicted through this teacher's statement:

Well I guess what I realized is there is a way to tie it all up together that you can do both. You can teach and learn and be a leader all at the same time. And you don't have to leave one behind the other.

Conclusion

All the evidence and research from this study discloses that teacher leadership can improve teaching and learning in schools and districts. Insights from this research reveal that for teacher leadership to be an effective and sustainable approach to improving educational practices the following elements need consideration:

Teacher and administrator professional preparation for teacher leadership in schools and districts must happen. This is accomplished through pre-service preparation for teachers and administrators while in their respective programs toward certification. For teachers and administrators already in practice, partnerships with universities and state education agencies can support the development of training modules and application strategies to bring teacher leadership into schools and districts.

Teachers and school leaders working in collaboration to plan for improving teaching and learning through *shared leadership* practices where teachers take the lead in curriculum and assessment development and implementation; and professional learning experiences for teachers based on the school or district's strategic plan for improvement.

School systems and structures are changed to meet the demands of the time required for teacher leaders to take on shared leadership roles and fully implement them. Teachers are assigned

a classroom position in the school or district but have responsibilities outside the classroom in a teacher leader role to support the teaching and learning process.

Implications for Future Research

The participants in this study were teachers that were highly accomplished practitioners in their fields of instruction and perhaps represented teachers that were not the average teacher in schools in districts. This could account for their willingness to step beyond the classroom and embark on a journey that they had not experienced prior to the Teacher Leadership Initiative. For teacher leadership to become the *norm* for improving teaching and learning in schools and districts, a comprehensive look from the novice teacher's entrance into teaching and their professional pathway to accomplished practitioner as a teacher leader is an area for future studies. Studies conducted to explore novice teachers' induction into a particular pathway whether through a master's level program or through a state level implementation of teacher leadership to the teacher leader level could provide the data needed for practitioners to utilize teacher leadership to improve schools and districts. Included in the data collected would be the knowledge of the increased effectiveness of the teachers in the schools and districts evidenced through elevated student achievement. Future studies that reveal improvement in student achievement due to the development of teacher leaders from the onset of teaching could establish the protocols needed for changes in teacher and administrator pre-service preparation as well as the policies, structures, and practices necessary for implementation after certification in schools and districts. These studies could also provide a solution to the high levels of teacher attrition that exists today in schools and districts.

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