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Is it Teacher Leadership? Validation of the Five Features of Teacher Leadership Framework and Self-Determination Guide

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When teachers have a practical, easy to use tool to self-assess acts of teacher leadership, they are better equipped to develop as leaders by self-determining to whom or what they are committed (relatedness), what they know and can do (competence), and when and how to act (autonomy). The purpose of this mixed methods study was to assess the validity of the Five Features of Teacher Leadership Framework and Self-Determination Guide (FFTL) through field testing by credentialed teacher leaders. Twenty-five credentialed teacher leaders representing all six regions of the United States participated in the study. The FFTL was favorably viewed by all 25 teacher leaders, revealing reasonably strong confidence in the tool's face, content, and construct validity. The findings suggest that participants considered the FFTL credible enough to trust as a guide for self-determining acts of teacher leadership. By describing an act of teacher leadership and using the FFTL to self-determine the degree to which the act accomplished the five core features of teacher leadership, the teacher leaders in this study were empowered to grow and develop as leaders privately, in their own way, and at their own pace. More research is needed.

Keywords: construct validity, content validity, face validity, reflective practice, Self-Determination Theory, teacher leadership, teacher leadership framework

Introduction

Teacher leadership has been studied for decades, yet the concept remains largely ambiguous. No single definition, framework, or rubric is commonly accepted; and the research base remains largely atheoretical (Schott et al., 2020; Wenner & Campbell, 2016). In scholarly efforts to articulate the concept, teacher leadership has been described in terms of influence (York-Barr & Duke, 2004), roles and responsibilities (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Moller & Pankake, 2006), functions (TLEC, 2012), competencies (NEA, et al., 2018), skill sets (Danielson, 2006), worldviews (Smulyan, 2016), and social networks (Shea, 2020). Each perspective helps to build collective understanding of teacher leadership, yet multiple conceptions make it difficult for teachers to apply the research to their daily practice.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers began leading in new and different ways, and many stepped into teacher leadership roles for the first time (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021), suggesting that teacher leadership may simply need the right conditions or opportunities to emerge and develop. In the aftermath of the pandemic, Berry and colleagues (2020) called for strengthening existing systems of teacher leadership by identifying the many ways teachers lead, creating and operationalizing teacher leadership standards, and recognizing teacher leaders in a variety of ways. However, teachers do not always recognize their own or others' leadership efforts, especially when teacher leadership is enacted informally (Hanuscin, et al., 2012) or contributed at the middle and high school levels (Angelle & DeHart, 2011). Moreover, well-known teacher leadership frameworks such as the Teacher Leader Model Standards (TLMS) and the Teacher Leadership Competencies (TLC) may not be easily accessible to teachers due to their extensive detail.

Today's teachers need a more practical teacher leadership framework; something short and simple to help them self-identify and self-assess acts of teacher leadership. Building on the principles of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), when teachers have a practical, easy to use tool to self-assess acts of teacher leadership, they are better equipped to develop as leaders by self-determining to whom or what they are committed (relatedness), what they know and can do (competence), and when and how to act (autonomy). The purpose of this mixed methods study was to assess the face, content, and construct validity of one such tool, the Five Features of Teacher Leadership Framework and Self-Determination Guide (FFTL), through field testing by credentialed teacher leaders.

Five Features of Teacher Leadership

Using current scholarly conceptions of teacher leadership, I designed the FFTL over ten years' time to provide a practical tool, grounded in theory and empirical research, that teachers can easily access and apply in daily practice, individually or in collaboration, for the purpose of professional growth toward teacher leadership. The FFTL asserts that every act of teacher leadership has five core features; teacher leadership is student-centered, action-oriented, beyond one classroom, a positive influence, and collaborative. Teacher leadership is *student-centered* because its ultimate objective is student learning and well-being. Teacher leadership is *action-oriented* because it involves hands-on effort and engagement toward a specific purpose. Teacher leadership extends *beyond one classroom* because it involves, affects, and/or benefits students across classrooms, grade levels, teams, schools, and/or districts. Teacher leadership is *a positive influence* because it benefits students, builds relationships with colleagues, and/or encourages participation for the ultimate purpose of lasting improvement. Teacher leadership is *collaborative* because teacher leaders must work together with others in their educational systems to accomplish tasks, address challenges, and resolve problems.

The FFTL is based on three underlying assumptions. First, acts of teacher leadership take place at the individual level (Wenner & Campbell, 2018). Therefore, the framework's primary unit of analysis is a single teacher leadership experience. Second, students and their families are the exclusive clients or customers of schools. Therefore, acts of teacher leadership must render direct and/or indirect benefits to students. Third, teacher leadership is both interactive and influential. Therefore, in addition to student benefits, analyzing acts of teacher leadership must explicitly consider collaboration with others, positive influence, and scope of impact. With these core features and assumptions in mind, teacher leadership can be defined as an action-oriented, collaborative process through which effective teachers positively influence student learning and well-being beyond one classroom. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the framework.

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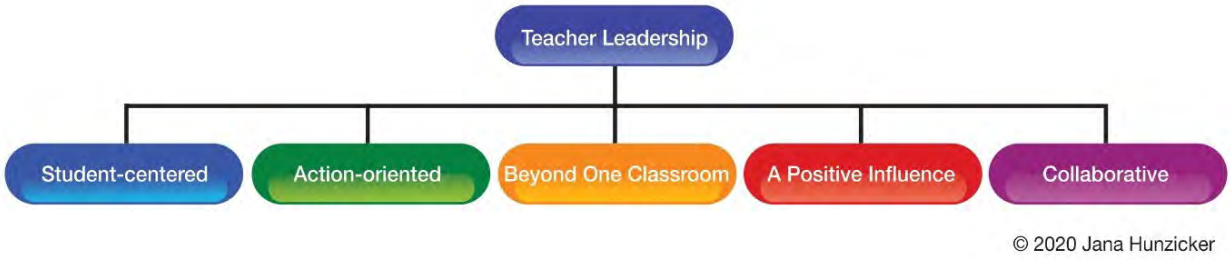
Figure 1.
Five Features of Teacher Leadership



Self-Determination Guide

To ensure that the FFTL is user-friendly, the five core features are further elaborated with an 11-question self-determination guide designed to facilitate teacher self-reflection and self-assessment (see Appendix A). Each question is grounded in research.

Teacher Leadership is Student-Centered

Research makes clear that student learning and well-being is the primary objective of teacher leadership. Silva et al. (2000) memorably described teacher leadership as "ultimately based on doing what is right by children" (p. 799). Huang (2016) wrote that teacher leaders possess a "strong and autonomous will" that is closely related to "students' welfare and learning" (p. 228). Directly, teacher leaders initiate and lead efforts designed to benefit students. For example, Oqvist and Malmstrom (2016) found that teacher leaders increase student motivation and achievement by providing academic and social-emotional support, inviting students to take ownership of their learning, and maintaining high expectations for learning and conduct. Indirectly, teacher leaders act on their concerns for students by improving their teaching practice and helping others do the same. For example, King and Smith (2020) described how teachers developed teaching and leadership skills by co-designing and delivering an all-day professional development experience for fellow teachers.

In the widely adopted Framework for Teaching Evaluation Instrument (Danielson, 2013), teachers achieving the distinguished level of performance are described in component 4f as "highly proactive in serving students" and making "a concerted effort to ensure opportunities are available for all students to be successful" (p. 103). Student success is also the ultimate purpose of teacher leadership in the Teacher Leader Model Standards [TLMS] (TLEC, 2012). While Domains I, II, IV, and VII directly mention student learning in their titles, Domains III, V, and VI indirectly reference student learning and well-being through leading professional development, instructional improvement efforts, and community outreach.

Because the ultimate objective of teacher leadership is student learning and well-being, efforts made by teachers cannot be considered teacher leadership if they are not student-centered. To know for sure, teachers can ask the following question: 1) Is student learning and/or well-being the ultimate objective? If the answer is yes, it might be an act of teacher leadership.

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Teacher Leadership is Action-Oriented

Teacher leadership requires hands-on effort and/or engagement toward a specific purpose. Helterbran (2010) referred to "purposeful agency" as a teacher's motivation to act on behalf of students (p. 366). Bair (2016) referred to "activist teacher identity" as teachers using their instructional expertise to positively impact their students, school systems, and profession" (p. 461). In one study, teachers identified action taking as a key descriptor of teacher leadership (Cosenza, 2013). Teacher leaders in another study emphasized the importance of "engaging with issues from a broad social and political frame of reference [including] care and consideration of students, communities, and colleagues" (Smulyan, 2016, p. 19).

Acts of teacher leadership are also intentional. Coggins and McGovern (2014) asserted that teacher leaders "want to improve schools, expand their effect on students, and broaden their influence on the teaching profession" (p. 21). Wenner and Campbell (2016) wrote, "Teacher leaders take action to provide equitable educational opportunities for all students" (p. 26); and Lee et al. (2014) promoted teacher-led action research as "a call to act for our profession, for our schools, and for our society" (p. 222).

Components 4d, 4e, and 4f of Danielson's (2013) Framework for Teaching Evaluation Instrument communicate active verb phrases such as "regularly contributes" (p. 97), "takes an active leadership role" (p. 101), and "makes a concerted effort" (p. 105) to describe critical attributes at the distinguished level of performance. Similarly, each TLMS function and each TLC description begins with a strong action verb, such as designs, facilitates, organizes, determines, and crafts (NEA et al., 2018; TLEC, 2012).

Because teacher leadership requires hands-on effort and/or engagement toward a specific purpose, teaching efforts cannot be considered teacher leadership unless they are action-oriented. The second and third questions teachers can ask to distinguish teacher leadership from other teaching responsibilities are: 2) Does it require hands-on effort and/or engagement by teachers? and 3) Does it aim to achieve a specific purpose or outcome? If the answer to both questions is yes, it might be an act of teacher leadership.

Teacher Leadership Extends Beyond One Classroom

Most teacher leaders are highly effective teachers, and many remain committed to classroom teaching even as their professional influence expands (Killion, 2011). Therefore, teacher leadership can be distinguished from exemplary classroom teaching by its reach. In addition to being student-centered and action-oriented, acts of teacher leadership involve, affect, and/or benefit students from more than one classroom. Partners of the Teacher Leadership Institute, who wrote the TLCs, explain:

> Teachers' spheres of influence can tend to start out small: the classroom, some colleagues and, occasionally, their administration. Through teacher leadership…these spheres can expand, allowing teachers to transform the profession and shape the landscape" (NEA et al., 2018, p. 3).

Empirical studies reinforce the notion that teacher leadership extends beyond one classroom. Huang (2016) described teacher leadership as a process that stretches from a key leader to core members to general followers. Soglin et al. (2016) wrote, "Teacher leadership seeks to extend the influence of accomplished teachers from their classrooms to their school and district colleagues, policy leaders, and beyond" (p. 4).

All seven TLMS domains (TLEC, 2012) emphasize teacher leadership beyond one classroom, with instructional descriptions of grade-, team-, departmental-, and/or schoolwide leadership in Domains I through V; engagement with families, cultures, and communities in Domain VI; and local, statewide, and nationwide change in Domain VII. Similarly, most of the 23 TLCs (NEA et al., 2018) emphasize teacher leadership as school-, district-, state-, and nationwide endeavors such as coaching and mentoring, building capacity, and advocacy.

Because teacher leadership reaches beyond one classroom, exemplary classroom teaching does not, on its own, represent teacher leadership. The fourth question teachers can ask to distinguish teacher leadership is, 4) Does it involve, affect, and/or benefit students from more than one classroom? If the answer is yes, it might be an act of teacher leadership.

Teacher Leadership Exerts a Positive Influence

Schott et al. (2020) described teacher leadership "as a process of influencing others" (p. 6). More than influence alone, teacher leadership always exerts positive influence. Teacher leadership is useful, supportive, respectful, and/or inspiring. It is also grounded in data, research, and/or best practices.

Some studies demonstrate the positive influence of teacher leadership on student learning. One large-scale study found that the higher the statewide percentage of National Board Certified Teachers (NBCT), the greater the student achievement on state reading and mathematics assessments (Belson & Husted, 2015). A study comparing one middle school that used, and one middle school that did not use, instructional coaches confirmed that students' state test scores were significantly higher in the middle school where instructional coaching was utilized (Garcia et al., 2013).

Other studies document the positive influence of teacher leadership on teachers and schools. Dauksas and White (2010) asserted that schoolwide teacher leadership efforts can improve school climate and reduce teacher mobility. Wenner and Campbell (2016) affirmed that acts of teacher leadership can increase feelings of teacher empowerment and professionalism schoolwide; and a third study reported a significant, positive relationship between collective teacher efficacy and teachers' shared belief that together they could "make an educational difference to their students" (Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004, p. 190). Similarly, Chang (2011) found that distributing leadership responsibilities among teachers positively impacted teachers' academic optimism, which in turn positively affected student academic achievement.

The positive influence of teacher leadership is emphasized in well-known constructs of exemplary teaching and teacher leadership. For example, the primary mission of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS, 2021) is "to advance the quality of teaching and learning by maintaining high and rigorous standards for what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do" (para. 1). The TLMS (TLEC, 2012) Vision of Teacher Leadership for the 21st Century describes teachers who "model effective practices, exercise their influence in formal and informal contexts, and support collaborative team structures within their schools" (p. 11).

Because teacher leadership always exerts positive influence, teachers' efforts cannot be considered teacher leadership if they engender negative feelings or produce undesirable outcomes. The fifth and sixth questions teachers can ask to distinguish teacher leadership are, 5) Is it useful, supportive, respectful, and/or inspiring? and 6) Is it grounded in data, research, and/or best practices? If the answer to both questions is yes, it might be an act of teacher leadership.

Teacher Leadership is Collaborative

Unlike traditional notions of leadership, teacher leaders and followers frequently change position as teachers work together to accomplish tasks, address challenges, and resolve problems (Coleman et al., 2012). Smulyan (2016) wrote that teacher leaders view teaching as "a collaborative process that includes networking within and across schools and districts with the goal of building relationships, understanding, political power, and knowledge that will ultimately improve the education of all children" (p. 9). Lieberman and Friedrich (2010) described this side-by-side approach as "opening the classroom door and going public with teaching" and "working 'alongside' teachers and leading collaboratively" (p. 95).

Collaborative endeavors connected to teacher leadership include professional inquiry (Lee et al., 2014), professional learning communities (Hairon et al., 2015), mentoring (Carlough, 2016), instructional coaching (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2013), active engagement in school- and district-wide improvement efforts (Hunzicker, 2012), and informal sharing and support (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012; Toplinski, 2014). Whether it involves two teachers or an entire school faculty, teacher leadership is collaborative because it encourages active participation so that everyone can take responsibility – and credit – for successful outcomes.

Teachers are highly motivated to collaborate when they believe their efforts will positively impact students (Huang, 2016). The TLCs (NEA et al., 2018) assert, "Just as excellent teachers approach their practice from an array of perspectives and with many talents, teacher leadership requires many individuals' strengths and interests, coming together for the benefit of students and the profession" (p. 3).

Because teacher leadership is a collaborative process, teachers' independent efforts cannot be considered teacher leadership. The seventh, eighth, and ninth questions teachers can ask to distinguish teacher leadership are 7) Is more than one person involved? 8) Does it encourage everyone involved to actively participate and/or contribute? and 9) Does it encourage everyone involved to take responsibility – and credit – for a successful outcome? If the answer to all three questions is yes, it might be an act of teacher leadership.

Self-Determination Theory

Teachers' use of the FFTL as a tool for reflective practice is supported by the principles of Self-Determination Theory, which asserts that individuals naturally seek personal and professional growth to satisfy their basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). *Autonomy*, or "the need to self-regulate one's experiences and actions," is fulfilled when "one's behaviors are self-endorsed, or congruent with one's authentic interests and values" (p. 10). *Competence*, or one's "basic need to feel effectance and mastery" (p. 11), is accomplished when a person uses accumulated knowledge, skills, and experiences to successfully complete tasks, solve problems, and achieve goals. *Relatedness*, or feeling socially connected to others, is fully satisfied when "experiencing oneself as giving or contributing to others" (p. 11).

According to Self-Determination Theory, individuals *self-determine*, or decide upon, their identities and actions based on their underlying need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). However, experiencing autonomy, competence, and relatedness all at once is dependent on both internal and external factors. For example, teachers motivated to take initiative are more likely to do so in environments that offer flexibility and encourage self-regulation. Because Self-Determination Theory asserts that individuals are

intrinsically motivated toward change and growth when they feel a sense of belonging, attachment, or commitment to other people (relatedness); believe they possess the knowledge and skills necessary to take intentional action (competence); and feel in control of their actions and decisions (autonomy), it stands to reason that some teachers develop as leaders by self-determining to whom or what they are committed (relatedness), what they need to know or be able to do (competence), and when and how to act (autonomy).

Both Self-Determination Theory and the FFTL are based on holistic experiences related to personal and professional growth, sometimes referred to as a gestalt experience or "something that is made of many parts and yet is somehow more than or different from the combination of its parts" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Just as arriving at a point of self-determination is dependent upon an individual's synchronized fulfillment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017); achieving an act of teacher leadership is dependent upon a teacher's synchronized achievement of an act that is student-centered, action-oriented, beyond one classroom, a positive influence, and collaborative.

According to Self-Determination Theory, fulfilling two of the three basic psychological needs is not failure; it simply means that complete fulfillment and high-quality functioning are unlikely to be achieved, and that opportunities remain for continued personal and professional growth. Similarly, achieving only four of the FFTL distinguishes an act of *teacher professionalism*, defined in this study as professional performance expected of all state-licensed teachers who are employed full time and hold tenured teaching status in a school or school district, rather than an act of *teacher leadership.* This distinction is, in fact, the reason for using the FFTL.

Research Methods

The purpose of the study was to assess the validity of the FFTL through field testing by credentialed teacher leaders. The study addressed three research questions:

1. To what degree do teacher leaders perceive that the framework distinguishes acts of teacher leadership from acts of teacher professionalism?
2. To what degree do teacher leaders perceive that the framework represents essential features of teacher leadership while avoiding non-essential features?
3. To what degree do teacher leaders perceive that the framework completely and accurately represents authentic acts of teacher leadership?

The study utilized a convergent mixed methods research design, described by Creswell and Creswell (2018) as "a form of mixed methods design in which the researcher converges or merges quantitative and qualitative data in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem" (p. 15). This design was selected because, in Saldana's (2013) words, "Sometimes words say it best; sometimes numbers do; and sometimes both can work in concert to compose a richer answer and corroborate each other" (p. 73). The study's design was grounded in my belief that reflective practice through teacher storytelling is a useful way to elicit teachers' tacit knowledge. In support, Berry and colleagues (2020) recently called for teachers to spread their expertise through "evidence-based stories" (p. 1). Kratka (2015) explained, "Through stories, we give moral, practical or aesthetic meaning to situations and are able to better understand ourselves, our broader culture and our knowledge" (p. 845).

Participant Recruitment

Teacher leaders were recruited to participate in the study using exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling (Research Methodology, 2018). In October 2019, I sent an email message describing the study to 48 scholars of teacher leadership within my nationwide professional network. Each scholar was asked to forward the email to two P-12 (pre-school through high school) credentialed teacher leaders who might be interested in participating in the study. *Credentialed teacher leaders* were defined as currently practicing teachers who held one or more of the following credentials: National Board Certification; graduate degree in teacher leadership; state-granted teacher leader endorsement, certificate, or license; or at least three years of experience in a school- or district-wide leadership role. The forwarded email message invited teacher leaders to participate in the study and included a link to read the informed consent materials, give informed consent, and begin participating in a one-time, anonymous online survey.

In January 2020, due to a low response rate, a follow up email was sent to the 48 scholars repeating the request to forward the email invitation to two credentialed teacher leaders. In March 2020, when COVID-19 prompted the closure of schools across the country, recruitment and participation in the study temporarily ceased. In June 2020, once the academic year concluded and businesses began re-opening, the recruitment email was sent to an additional 200 education administrators, NBCTs, and teacher's union leaders serving in state-level positions in each of the 50 states whose email addresses were publicly available on the Internet. This time, those contacted were asked to forward the invitation to participate to all credentialed teacher leaders within their statewide networks. In July 2020, a final recruitment reminder email was sent to all 248 primary contacts.

Data Collection

Qualtrics Survey Software (Qualtrics, 2018) was used to create and administer an online survey that consisted of 34 yes/no or rated items and ten open-ended response items or opportunities to elaborate. Participants were directed to write a description of a recent act of teacher leadership (either their own or someone else's), analyze it using the FFTL, and complete the survey. Participation in the study took 30 to 45 minutes. Because the survey link was provided in the invitation to participate, several teacher leaders read the informed consent information on the first page of the survey, chose not to participate, and exited the survey without completing it. Prior to data analysis, all surveys where participants did not describe a recent act of teacher leadership were discarded.

Research Participants

Between October 2019 and July 2020, 25 credentialed teacher leaders fully participated in the study. All six regions of the United States were represented, with 32% (8 teacher leaders) responding from the Pacific region, 28% (7 teacher leaders) responding from the Southwest region, 16% (4 teacher leaders) responding from the Southeast region, and 8% each (2 teacher leaders from each region) responding from the Northeast, Midwest, and Rocky Mountain regions. Collectively, the 25 research participants held a total of 68 teacher leadership credentials, including three or more years of experience in a teacher leadership role (29%), National Board Certification (26%), a state-granted teacher leader endorsement, certificate, or license (21%), a graduate degree in teacher leadership (18%), and other instructional leadership roles or degrees (6%).

Data Analysis

Data analysis took place during summer and fall 2021. Quantitative data, presented in the form of percentages, were automatically calculated by the Qualtrics survey software. Qualitative data were downloaded into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for initial coding, second cycle coding, and horizontal and vertical analysis. Initial coding of the study's qualitative data involved two phases. First, I conducted a close reading of participants' teacher leadership descriptions and used dichotomous coding (Saldana, 2013) to assign "basic labels to the data" (p. 83). Each description was given a code of either COVID-19 or Not COVID-19 to distinguish which participants' teacher leadership experiences were related to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. Then, each description was given a code of either Teacher Leadership or Not Teacher Leadership to identify which descriptions were and were not acts of teacher leadership based on the FFTL. The dichotomous codes revealed that 40% (10 of 25) of the teacher leadership descriptions occurred within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and 60% (15 of 25) did not. Additionally, 96% (24 of 25) of the descriptions were considered an act of teacher leadership based on the FFTL and 4% (1 of 25) were not.

During the second cycle of coding, I pre-coded (Saldana, 2013) the participants' open-ended comments by color coding and underlining during my first reading of the evaluative survey responses to flag participants' doubts, disagreements, and critiques of the FFTL in preparation for deeper analysis.

Finally, using the rows and columns in the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet I examined participants' open-ended responses horizontally (i.e., responses by individual respondent) and vertically (i.e., responses by survey item). First, I examined each participant's survey responses from beginning to end. Because participants' responses to the FFTL were mostly positive, I looked specifically for critical responses and participant misconceptions. Next, I analyzed all participants' responses for each survey item. Again, because participants' responses were mostly positive, I looked for direct quotations that illuminated nuances and articulated teacher leader insights. Direct quotations asking questions and offering suggestions were noted, and patterns in participants' responses were identified and organized around the study's three research questions.

Findings

Face Validity

The first research question was designed to assess the framework's face validity, defined as an instrument's perceived ability to measure what it is intended to measure based on the words used, the format of the instrument, and other readily apparent characteristics (Ramli, et al., 2020). Because evaluation of face validity involves subjective judgments based on individual perceptions, misinterpretations can be exposed, examined, and resolved (Ramli, et al., 2020). In this study, the face validity of the FFTL was analyzed based on the degree to which participants believed the framework and self-determination guide helped to distinguish acts of teacher leadership from acts of teacher professionalism.

After using the FFTL to self-assess their act of teacher leadership and reflect on the outcome, participants' overall responses suggested moderate to enthusiastic confidence in the tool's face validity. Nineteen of the 25 participants (76%) agreed or strongly agreed that the FFTL helped to distinguish acts of teacher leadership from acts of teacher professionalism, although six (24%) remained undecided. No participants disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Participant 25, who strongly agreed, stated, “Recognizing when someone goes above and beyond typical teacher professionalism is easier to identify using the Five Features of Teacher Leadership Framework.” Participant 19, who also strongly agreed, wrote, “This is a very concise and deliberate definition of teacher leadership.” Participant 6 reflected, “I found these to be different than any teacher leadership features I've seen before. I think [the framework] does distinguish acts of teacher leadership from acts of professionalism.”

However, not every participant was certain of the tool’s face validity. Participant 24 agreed, but commented, “There is a bit of cross-over, so unless one is well-versed in 'leadership' there may be some confusion.” Participant 15, who was undecided, wrote, “Honestly these features are expected to be demonstrated by teachers in the classroom on a daily basis.” Participant 22 wrote, “While [the framework] outlines teacher leadership, I think some [features] can be applied to teacher professionalism.” Participant 3 stated, “I understand the difference [between teacher professionalism and teacher leadership], but I don’t know that the framework in itself does enough to describe the difference.”

In the end, though, most of the participants indicated that the framework was useful for distinguishing acts of teacher leadership. Participant 5 explained, “Leadership differs from professionalism because it goes beyond a single classroom and a single teacher. A teacher can be professional, yet not a leader. The five areas help to distinguish the two.” Participant 22 concluded, “I think leadership extends beyond professionalism because the teacher is taking active steps to make a positive difference in students’ lives, including students outside his/her own classroom. It's going above and beyond. This framework helps make that distinction.”

Content Validity

The second research question was designed to assess the framework’s content validity, defined as an instrument’s ability to encompass all essential characteristics or descriptors of a concept (in this case, teacher leadership) without including extraneous characteristics or descriptors (Ramli, et al., 2020). Evaluation of content validity requires close review and affirmation by experts. Therefore, I developed the features and questions of the FFTL based on an extensive review and synthesis of the literature over many years’ time (scholarly expertise) and then had the tool scrutinized (via this study) by credentialed teacher leaders from across the country (practical expertise).

All 25 participants (100%) described the core features of *student-centered*, *action-oriented*, *a positive influence*, and *collaborative* as extremely useful or somewhat useful in helping to distinguish their self-described act as teacher leadership. Participant 1 wrote, “The features and the accompanying questions were clear and easy for me to check.” Participant 5 shared, “I think each of the five areas helps to encompass the various levels of involvement for both student and teacher success.” Participant 16 concluded, “I agree that each of the Five Features needs to be present to actually be leadership.”

The framework’s emphasis on direct and indirect student-centeredness was reinforced by two participants. Participant 2 wrote, “Sometimes, teacher leadership is about directly impacting children; other times, it is about supporting teachers so that they can more effectively support their students.” Participant 21 reflected, “Direct and indirect impacts on student learning both can be equally valid. Although my teacher leadership example had indirect impact on students, [that] does not mean it is not teacher leadership at work.”

However, not all participants embraced the content validity of the FFTL. Participant 4 stated that the *student-centered* feature was "more subjective than the others." Participants 10, 11, and 23 questioned the feature of *collaboration*. Participant 13 reflected:

> I am not sure how I feel about the collaborative piece. I work at a school district with many cultural problems. Collaboration is not encouraged as much as it could be from the leadership; therefore, I don't collaborate as often as I could. Does this mean I am a less effective leader? I am not sure.

Participant 23 commented that collaboration "looks" different at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Participants 12 and 22 took issue with *a positive influence*. Participant 12 asked, "Defined by who?" Participant 22 wrote, "Obviously, [teacher leadership] should have a positive influence on the student, but must it have a positive influence on anyone else?"

Twenty-three participants (92%) described the core feature *beyond one classroom* as extremely or somewhat useful, yet this feature was confusing for several participants. Participant 12 stated, "I think beyond one classroom and collaborative are redundant." Participant 22 asked, "Is the classroom a future classroom for the student, such as a future grade? Or does it refer to other classrooms at the time the student is in your class? Participant 23 wrote, "Beyond one classroom is confusing. Do you really mean beyond one teacher?" but Participant 21 shared a completely different perspective: "I think 'beyond one classroom' is what pushes leadership beyond professionalism."

Although one participant did not respond to the set of questions about the usefulness of the self-determination guide (see Appendix A), 100% of the 24 participants who responded considered seven of the 11 questions on the guide to be somewhat useful or extremely useful in helping to distinguish their self-described act as teacher leadership. Questions 1, 5, and 10 were considered somewhat or extremely useful by 23 of the 24 participants (96%), and question 4 was considered somewhat or extremely useful by 22 of the 24 (92%). Participant 5 explained that the questions "helped focus on specific actions that support the five key features," and Participant 6 stated that the questions "make [teacher leadership] work grounded and not just your opinion or for fun." Participant 19 wrote, "I was able to use the guiding questions to look at my example and make a decision." Participant 14 reflected, "I liked thinking about what would need to be modified if there was a no answer. The worksheet made me do some deeper thinking."

Even so, three of the 25 participants were not certain that the 11 questions were useful in distinguishing an act of teacher leadership. For example, participant 23 stated, "Some features need more clarification. Do ALL need to be present ALL the time? That might be unrealistic."

While 22 of the 25 participants (88%) agreed or strongly agreed that the FFTL represents essential features of teacher leadership while avoiding non-essential features; two participants (8%) were undecided, and one (4%) disagreed. Participant 23, who was undecided, commented, "I'm not sure what the non-essential features are." Participant 24, also undecided, stated, "I think there are other aspects of teacher leadership that are not included in the FFTL." Participant 21, who disagreed, explained, "I think student-centered is professionalism."

Again, after using the FFTL to self-assess their act of teacher leadership and reflect on the outcome, participants' responses suggested moderate to enthusiastic confidence in its content validity. Several participants praised the framework for including the essential features of teacher leadership and avoiding extraneous features. Participant 8 wrote, "Yes! I think the features lay out clearly what teacher leadership needs to look like." Participants 10 and 13 agreed that there

was nothing “extraneous” or “superfluous” in the framework; and Participant 6, summarized, “It's to the point and doesn't add fluff.”

Many participants shared similar comments about the self-determination guide questions. Participant 5 stated, “The well-defined questions helped outline what a leadership situation would look like.” Participant 1 shared, “The questions were clear and guided my thinking,” and Participant 4 wrote, “The worksheet captured the most important features of teacher leadership and allowed me to look for alignment within my description.”

Still, some teacher leaders remained unsure about the tool’s content validity. Participant 10 wrote, “I can't think of anything that's left out or that I would add to the framework, but I haven't considered it deeply enough.” Participant 7 observed, “There is nothing about teacher fortitude and excellence.” Participant 24 noted that passion and initiative were not included, and Participant 23 commented, “You are missing effective. Was the goal achieved? Is there a model for continuous improvement?” Participant 16 also commented on goals, asking, “Does the goal need to be developed by teachers? I don't see that explicitly described in the framework.” Participant 13 stated, “I don't see anything objectionable about these criteria, but I also don't see anything in them about systematically tracking student learning. That's a pretty important component that's not included here.”

Construct Validity

The third research question was designed to assess the framework’s construct validity, defined as an instrument’s ability to appropriately measure what it is intended to measure based on the instrument’s response items or questions (Ramli, et al., 2020). Evaluation of construct validity requires comparison and contrast between the instrument being evaluated and similar constructs. Therefore, I field tested the FFTL (via this study) against credentialed teacher leaders’ comparison and contrast of self-described acts of teacher leadership.

Nineteen of the 25 participants (76%) agreed or strongly agreed that the FFTL represents authentic acts of teacher leadership, although six teacher leaders (24%) remained undecided. Participant 6 strongly agreed, explaining “Your work either meets the standards or it doesn’t. Very clear.” Participant 1 agreed, but stated, “I think that each act could be more completely described.” Participant 11, who was undecided, wrote, “Teacher leadership may not embody all of [the five] features. When teachers step up and take control of the situation, that is teacher leadership.”

This time, after using the FFTL to self-assess their act of teacher leadership and reflect on the outcome, participants’ responses suggested relatively enthusiastic confidence in the instrument’s construct validity. All 25 teacher leaders who participated in the study (100%) rated their overall impression of the FFTL as favorable or very favorable. Thirteen, or 52%, rated their overall impression of the framework as very favorable. Participant 14 noted that “the questions provoked deeper thinking,” and Participant 5 liked “how the accompanying questions break down each area.” Participants 7 and 17 described the framework as easy to understand, remember, and implement; and Participant 2 shared, “[The framework] has already influenced my thinking and will continue to serve as a resource to inform my future leadership acts.”

Twelve, or 48%, of participants rated their overall impression of the framework as favorable. Participant 18 stated that the framework “helps define the work [of teacher leadership] and build more ideas to grow on.” Participant 11 wrote, “It is a good framework to measure teacher leadership, but teacher leadership may not involve all of the features.” Participant 12

shared, “It’s a good start, I guess.” No study participants rated their overall impression of the framework as unfavorable or very unfavorable.

Overall, 22 of the 25 teacher leaders in the study (88%) reported that their self-described act of teacher leadership was affirmed by the 11-question FFTL self-determination guide; and 23 of the 25 teacher leaders (92%) agreed or strongly agreed with the guide’s analysis of teacher leadership. Participant 17 reflected:

> The key features outlined in the worksheet exemplify how to be an agent of change in a way that puts student best interest in the forefront and involves colleagues in ways that allow them to build responsibility and take ownership in the project.

Participant 22 concluded, “If someone does an act that meets all the requirements of the framework, then I would consider that an authentic act of teacher leadership.”

Participant Misconceptions

Although some participants questioned specific features of the framework, or specific questions in the self-determination guide, overall regard for the FFTL was favorable. However, horizontal analysis revealed misconceptions by four of the study’s 25 participants. The misconceptions focused on the features of *beyond one classroom* and *collaboration*. Three misconceptions involved participants’ failure to confirm an act of teacher leadership using the FFTL.

Participant 8

> Participant 8 described the following act of teacher leadership:
> As part of my yearly evaluation, one of my professional goals was to provide instructional coaching to volunteer teachers. Four teachers volunteered in my department, and I spent several prep periods observing a lesson and writing feedback in the I See/I Hear framework and describing what students and teachers were doing. The goal of the observations was to maximize student learning. After taking copious notes during the lesson, I debriefed with each teacher individually and reviewed my feedback. I also suggested three "glows" (areas of strength) and two "grows" (areas that could be improved). I followed up with another round of feedback and debriefs a few months later. Teachers did not have to commit to taking any action steps.

After analyzing the description using the FFTL, Participant 8 mistakenly concluded that this was not an act of teacher leadership because it did not benefit students from more than one classroom. However, according to the FFTL, the act that Participant 8 described is indeed an act of teacher leadership. In this example, *beyond one classroom* was accomplished when Participant 8 prepared each of the volunteer teachers to apply what they learned together in one classroom to benefit students in other classrooms.

Participant 22

> Participant 22 described the following act of teacher leadership:
> Ms. Smith noticed that one of her students, Annie, was struggling to stay focused in class. Ms. Smith spoke with Annie's mother, who indicated that Annie had been diagnosed with ADHD and that she was very concerned about how it could affect Annie's performance in school. Ms. Smith began observing Annie more intently during class, taking note of what affected her focus and trying different strategies to help her focus more. Then, she contacted the school counselor about creating a Section 504 plan for Annie. Ms. Smith met with Annie, her mother, and the counselor to create a Section 504 plan. The plan included provisions for Annie to sit somewhere else in the classroom during testing and to have alternative seating. While Ms. Smith already provided these accommodations to Annie, she wanted to ensure that Annie could still receive them in future years, thus enshrining them in the Section 504 plan. After the Section 504 plan was created and implemented, Ms. Smith noticed a positive change in Annie's focus, which also helped improve her grades.

Like Participant 8, after analyzing the description using the FFTL, Participant 22 mistakenly concluded that this was not an act of teacher leadership because it did not extend beyond one classroom. According to the FFTL, the act that Participant 22 described is indeed an act of teacher leadership. In this example, *beyond one classroom* was accomplished because the Section 504 plan that this teacher initiated and helped to secure will benefit Annie from year-to-year (and therefore from classroom-to-classroom) as she continues her education.

Participant 11

> Participant 11 described the following act of teacher leadership:
> Prior to the 2019-2020 school year, I had been a one class period TOSA, providing technology assistance to teachers, but my district made the decision to no longer fund the program. During the 2019-2020 school year, I continued to offer my assistance to teachers. When the pandemic hit, the requests increased. I offered my assistance to teachers who were uncomfortable with technology and instructed them on the best uses for software and apps for student learning and engagement. I would walk the teacher through the steps to set up the software to use with their students. I also created videos to assist them if they could not remember the steps. We also discussed best practices for each app. I did this without direction from my school administrators. I continued to give assistance and guidance until the close of the school year.

After analyzing this description using the FFTL, Participant 11 mistakenly concluded that this was not an act of teacher leadership because it was not an everyone-together-at-once experience. However, according to the FFTL, the act that Participant 11 described is indeed an act of teacher leadership. In fact, this example describes several small acts of teacher leadership. It only takes two people to collaborate. In this instance, *collaboration* was accomplished when Participant 11 provided one-on-one technology assistance to fellow teachers in person, virtually, by providing written instructions, and via video tutorials.

Participant 13

The fourth misconception involved the inaccurate labeling of an act of teacher professionalism as an act of teacher leadership. Participant 13 described the following act of teacher leadership:

> When the governor ordered all schools closed and we were switched to distance learning, I created new curriculum for the fourth quarter. Once I had done that, I compiled written directions for 16 individual lessons along with a timeline for completing them over the next 8 weeks. I compiled all these new materials into books that I had printed and bound. I mailed these workbooks to any student of mine who requested them for any reason, including those who did not have internet access. This enabled them to keep learning even without a stable internet connection, computer, or otherwise stable home environment.

In this instance, after analyzing the description using the FFTL, Participant 13 mistakenly concluded that this was an act of teacher leadership, even though it did not satisfy the *beyond one classroom* feature. According to the FFTL, Participant 13's description better fits the definition of teacher professionalism. Even though Participant 13's efforts were above and beyond due to the unique demands of the COVID-19 pandemic, they constitute professional performance expected of all teachers, even when a teacher is responsible for teaching multiple classes.

Discussion

For this study, Self-Determination Theory offered a rich theoretical foundation that supports what we know about teacher leaders and teacher leadership. Teacher leaders tend to seek personal and professional growth (Cheng & Szeto, 2015; Lowery-Moore et al., 2016), and Self-Determination Theory strengthens the idea that teachers are intrinsically motivated to lead by articulating individuals' desire to satisfy their basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. As one example, Taylor et al. (2019) found that teachers' personal definitions of teacher leadership impacted their leadership approaches; teaching experts utilized their instructional and content knowledge to assist fellow teachers, whereas marketers used their persuasive communication and modeling skills. Garcia Torres (2019) explained, "When teachers are granted greater control over their work conditions through distributed leadership opportunities, they experience greater self-efficacy to collaborate with peers, which is also associated with greater job satisfaction levels" (pp. 120-121).

Overall, the FFTL was favorably viewed by all 25 teacher leaders who participated in the study, revealing reasonably strong confidence in the tool's face, content, and construct validity. The findings suggest that participants considered the FFTL credible enough to trust as a guide for *self-determining* their teacher leadership actions. Participants' confidence in the FFTL supports the study's assertion that, when teachers have a practical, easy to use tool to self-assess acts of teacher leadership, they are better equipped to develop as leaders by self-determining to whom or what they are committed (relatedness), what they know and can do (competence), and when and how to act (autonomy).

The FFTL seems to have supported teacher leader development in three ways. First, the FFTL facilitated participants' process of self-determination both as they described their act of teacher leadership and as they used the FFTL to distinguish the act as either teacher leadership or

teacher professionalism. For example, Participant 11's written description of teacher leadership self-determined her evidence of *competence* (self-confidence in her technology knowledge, skill, and experience), *relatedness* (a personal desire to assist teachers with technology during the pandemic), and *autonomy* (making the decision to provide assistance to teachers without direction from school administrators). Although Participant 11 mistakenly concluded that her actions were not teacher leadership according to the FFTL, she herself made this self-determination, which is an important criterion for professional growth through reflective practice (Danielson, 2013; Schon, 1991).

Second, the FFTL asked questions that encouraged individual teacher leader development. Cherkowski (2018) acknowledged well-known platforms for teacher leader development such as the TLMS as valuable for promoting "a formal, regulated approach to teacher leadership development" (p. 72) but endorsed reflective questions "as opportunities for personal reflection and development for individuals or small groups" on a "less formal level" (p. 72). Margolis and Strom (2020) also asserted that assessing the broad impact of teacher leadership relies on asking new questions, and Lowery-Moore et al. (2016) also used questions to guide the self-reflections of teacher leaders.

Third, the FFTL may have helped participants access their tacit knowledge. We have known for years that the act of teaching is often based on unconscious knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Schon, 1991). Therefore, it stands to reason that teacher leadership is also tacit. For example, as Participant 2 used the FFTL to determine her written description as either teacher leadership or teacher professionalism, she reflected, "I had almost an epiphany while evaluating [my description] using this metric, and I felt the worksheet effectively articulated facets of teacher leadership that are implicit but not often highlighted." The number of undecided responses in this study's findings is also an indicator of the tacit nature of teacher leadership. If this is the case, reflective practice using a tool such as the FFTL is one means of self-directed professional development that may assist teachers in articulating tacit knowledge, skills, and dispositions in a developmentally appropriate and non-threatening manner (Kratka, 2015; Schon, 1991).

Participants' trust in the FFTL's face, content, and construct validity may have been due to the tool's developmentally friendly structure. Many participants reflected on the ease of using the tool to analyze an act of teacher leadership that had already taken place. For example, Participant 4 wrote:

> When I returned to my description, I was able to look for and find the five specific features of teacher leadership as they were described in the worksheet. I was able to locate specific examples of these features within my description.

In addition, some participants recognized the value of using the FFTL to plan or strengthen acts of teacher leadership. For example, Participant 3 wrote, "Having a checklist before undertaking a teacher leadership task is very useful in making sure that it is successful on many levels." Solansky (2015) recommended that leadership development programs emphasizing self-determination consider participants' varying levels of readiness, incorporate implicit and explicit leadership awareness, provide limited choices, and include self- and subordinate assessments. By describing an act of teacher leadership and using the FFTL to self-determine the degree to which the act accomplished the five core features of teacher leadership, the teacher leaders in this study

were empowered to grow and develop as leaders privately, in their own way, and at their own pace.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study was its small sample size. Twenty-five research participants for a nationwide study renders very modest representation. However, the small sample size was alleviated by the facts that all 25 research participants were credentialed teacher leaders, and all six regions of the United States were represented. The primary limitation of the study was the possibility of researcher bias. Therefore, I took three intentional steps to ensure the study's integrity. First, during the recruitment phase, I used exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling to ensure that I did not have direct contact with potential research participants. Second, during the data analysis and writing stages, I strove to interpret participants' responses thoroughly and objectively, including reporting all significant participant responses in the final manuscript to avoid selective reporting. Third, the final report, in the form of a scholarly manuscript, was vetted by leading scholars of teacher leadership prior to publication.

Concluding Remarks

Berry and colleagues (2020) asserted that in today's educational climate "all teachers need to lead one way or another" (p. 18). When teachers have a practical, easy to use tool to self-assess acts of teacher leadership, they are better equipped to develop as leaders by self-determining to whom or what they are committed (relatedness), what they know and can do (competence), and when and how to act (autonomy). In this study, the FFTL was favorably viewed by all 25 teacher leaders who participated, revealing reasonably strong confidence in the tool's face, content, and construct validity. These findings suggest that participants considered the FFTL credible enough to trust as a guide for self-determining acts of teacher leadership. By describing an act of teacher leadership and using the FFTL to self-determine the degree to which the act accomplished the five core features of teacher leadership, the teacher leaders in this study were empowered to grow and develop as leaders privately, in their own way, and at their own pace. Clearly, more research is needed. It is my hope that readers of this article will build upon the study's findings by field testing the FFTL for themselves so that the tool can be refined and further validated by scholars and teacher leaders alike.

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Appendix A

Five Features of Teacher Leadership Self-Determination Guide

Five Features of Teacher Leadership Self-Determination Guide

Core Features	Accompanying Questions	Self-Determination and Reflection		
		Yes	No	11. If no, what must be modified to achieve a confident yes?
Student-centered	1. Is student learning, health, and/or well-being the ultimate objective?			
Action-oriented	2. Does it require hands-on effort and/or engagement by teachers? 3. Does it aim to achieve a specific purpose or outcome?			
Beyond one classroom	4. Does it involve, affect, and/or benefit students from more than one classroom?			
Positive influence	5. Is it useful, supportive, respectful, and/or inspiring? 6. Is it grounded in data, research, and/or best practices?			
Collaborative	**7. Is more than one person involved?** **8. Does it encourage everyone involved to actively participate and/or contribute?** **9. Does it encourage everyone involved to take responsibility – and credit – for a successful outcome?**			
	10. Is it teacher leadership?			