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Teacher Leader: A Conceptual Exploration

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Abstract. Teacher leadership has become an increasingly significant concept in contemporary educational systems. Rising concerns regarding student underachievement and evolving school needs require teachers not only to serve as transmitters of knowledge but also as leaders who guide school development. Since the 1980s, teacher leadership has shifted from administration-oriented responsibilities toward instructional leadership models. Numerous studies have demonstrated that teacher collaboration strengthens school culture, fosters trust, and enhances professional learning. Two major comprehensive reviews in the literature (York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Wenner & Campbell, 2017) indicate that teacher leadership still lacks a unified definition and that stronger theoretical and empirical research is needed. Therefore, it is considered that other factors related to teacher leadership also need to be investigated. The purpose of this study is to conduct a conceptual analysis of teacher leadership. This study was carried out using the document analysis method. In conclusion, the findings emphasize the need for continued research on teacher leadership and highlight the importance of prioritizing teacher leadership to strengthen educational systems in all respects.

Keywords. Teacher Leadership, Teacher Leader, Teacher Roles

Introduction

In today's education system, there is a growing need for individuals who go beyond merely transmitting knowledge and instead assume effective leadership roles. One of the key factors in meeting this need is teacher leaders. Teacher leadership refers to a teacher's ability to demonstrate effective leadership not only within the classroom but also at the school level, in collaboration with colleagues, and across the broader educational system. In this context, York-Barr and Duke (2004), in their research on the concept of teacher leadership, sought to answer the question "What is known about teacher leadership?". The study examined 140 works, and the authors concluded that teacher expertise constitutes the foundation for enhancing teacher quality and promoting improvements in teaching and learning. This domain of expertise is strengthened by modelling the effective instructional practices of successful teachers, encouraging the sharing of exemplary practices, providing guidance to novice teachers, and disseminating these practices through collaboration among colleagues.

Supporting this view, Mangin and Stoelinga (2008) stated that teachers occupy a unique position in fostering change, given their deep knowledge of teaching and learning. Similarly, Barth (2001) argued that leadership interactions among teachers can lay the

groundwork for educational advancements. Considering the concerning global trends in student achievement, demands for involving a greater number of teachers in leadership roles have been increasing (Goodwin, Low & Ng, 2013; Ryan, 1999).

Providing teachers with opportunities to exercise leadership is regarded as a fundamental element for achieving transformation at the leadership level, enhancing teacher quality, and improving student learning (Lieberman & Miller, 2004). The concept of teacher leadership first emerged in the early 1980s as an approach that supported shared decision-making processes and strengthened the professionalization of teaching practices (Goodwin et al., 2013; Little, 2003; Mangin, 2007). During this period, teacher leadership was interpreted through a perspective that positioned teachers in roles similar to school administrators, whose responsibilities were predominantly managerial (Little, 2003). The primary aim of the first teacher leaders was not to implement innovative institutional development processes, but rather to represent school administration and enhance the professional status of the teaching role (Little, 2003; Smylie, Conley & Marks, 2002). Over time, teacher leadership models gradually shifted away from structures centered mainly on managerial functions and evolved into a more instruction-oriented form (Little, 2003).

From the late 1980s through the early 1990s, the importance of teachers as instructional leaders became increasingly visible (Little, 2003; Mangin & Stoelinga, 2008; Silva, Gimbert & Nolan, 2000). Accordingly, approaches that conceptualize leadership and teacher leadership within an instruction-centered framework (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2008; Neumerski, 2013) emerged with the aim of supporting teacher learning and fostering the development of effective instructional practices (Lieberman & Miller, 2004). Teacher collaboration encompasses processes such as deepening the understanding of student learning, improving pedagogical practices, and engaging effectively in discussions related to teachers' professional work (Supovitz, Sirinides & May, 2010). It has been observed that teachers who collaborate on curriculum and instructional practices contribute to strengthening school culture, in-school trust, and professional relationships. Moreover, within a focused collaborative environment, teachers are empowered to assume both formal and informal leadership roles; their tendency to take responsibility for student learning increases, and they become more open to research and innovation.

There are two comprehensive review studies in the teacher leadership literature. The first is York-Barr and Duke's (2004) systematic examination of twenty years of research in this field. The second review was conducted by Wenner and Campbell (2017), who evaluated studies on teacher leadership carried out from 2004 to the present. Wenner and Campbell justify the need for their review by pointing to the growing interest in teacher leadership models in the thirteen years following York-Barr and Duke's study, the development of standards related to teacher leadership, and the emergence of university programs aimed at strengthening teacher leadership. Consistent with the findings of York-Barr and Duke, Wenner and Campbell (2017) highlight that teacher leadership still lacks a clear and universally accepted definition. They also emphasize the need for more robust empirical research, deeper examinations of equity and social justice dimensions, and a stronger theoretical foundation to support the progression of the field. In this context, the present study is expected to draw attention to the ongoing need for research on teacher leadership and to contribute to the existing body of literature.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to provide a conceptual analysis of teacher leadership. To achieve this aim, the following questions were addressed:

1. What is teacher leadership?
2. Who is a teacher leader?
3. Why is teacher leadership necessary?

Method

All written materials that provide information related to the topic addressed in the study are defined as “documents” (Balci, 2006). In this regard, the study was structured within the framework of a qualitative research approach, adopting “document analysis” as the method, in which written documents serve as the primary data source and qualitative data collection and analysis techniques are employed. A review of the existing literature indicates that conceptual analysis studies are largely conducted using a survey model; that nearly all such studies adopt a qualitative approach; and that document analysis is most commonly used as the sole data collection tool.

In this study, particular attention was given to accessing original and primary documents in order to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the concept of teacher leadership. The documents obtained were systematically analyzed and interpreted in accordance with the aims of the research.

All stages of the study were carried out in compliance with “Research and Publication Ethics” principles, and the study does not require ethics committee approval due to its nature.

Findings

The findings, which have been systematically analyzed and interpreted in line with the objectives of the study, are presented in this section.

What Is Teacher Leadership?

The primary rationale for focusing on teacher leadership is that the concept has not yet been fully defined, conceptualized, adequately understood, or clearly established in practice (Goodwin et al., 2013; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Neumerski, 2013; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Early conceptualizations of teacher leadership focused on specific and often formal roles; however, since the early 2000s, the understanding of teacher leadership has broadened to include leadership practices that emerge in more informal ways (Danielson, 2007; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Contemporary definitions of teacher leadership explicitly emphasize that leadership can manifest both formally and informally, and that it is not confined to official positions (Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2006; Supovitz, 2008; Supovitz et al., 2010). Teachers can influence their peers, enhance teaching and learning processes, and engage parents in contributing to school goals without holding a formal leadership role; moreover, such informal leadership can be as effective as formal leadership (Supovitz et al., 2010; York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009).

Teacher leadership is often described as developing naturally among professionals who collaborate, learn together, and engage in collective problem solving (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). The distinction between teacher leaders and their colleagues does not arise from status alone; the scope of responsibilities, the level of support provided, and the amount of time devoted to the role also increase (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Teachers assume leadership roles to enhance student learning, contribute to school improvement, inspire their colleagues, and encourage stakeholder participation in educational processes (Childs-Bowen, Moller & Scrivner, 2000). In this context, teacher leadership is defined as a process in which individuals

or groups influence colleagues and school stakeholders to improve teaching and learning practices and to enhance student achievement (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) define teacher leadership as teachers' contributions to guiding the development of advanced instructional practices both inside and outside the classroom, while assuming responsibility for the outcomes of these practices. Mangin and Stoelinga (2008), on the other hand, conceptualize teacher leadership as a school-based, educational, and non-supervisory leadership role. Similarly, Wenner and Campbell (2017) describe teacher leaders as teachers who maintain their instructional responsibilities in the classroom while simultaneously assuming leadership tasks outside the classroom.

When comparing five definitions of teacher leadership from 2000 to 2017, it is observed that while some researchers approach teacher leadership from a conceptual framework, others specifically emphasize that teacher leaders assume formal roles (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2008; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). The majority of definitions regard leadership as a process of influencing others, with this influence aimed at enhancing the teaching profession, student achievement, or both. Despite the diversity among definitions, Wilson (2016) supports the view that most conceptions of teacher leadership are significant as a mechanism for improving students' academic success and are consistent with previous discussions.

Teacher leadership that focuses on teaching and learning is assumed to establish a direct relationship between organizational change, instructional improvement, and student achievement (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2008; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Teachers in both formal and informal roles can contribute to the transformation of educational systems by making improvements in teaching and learning processes and by fostering a shared culture of professional expertise grounded in continuous development (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Lieberman & Miller, 2004). However, the existing literature reveals a limited number of studies examining how teacher leaders perform their roles and enhance instruction (Lord et al., 2008), how teacher leadership is implemented (Neumerski, 2013; Wenner & Campbell, 2017), or how other teachers respond to this leadership (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Who Is a Teacher Leader?

Teacher leadership is not a characteristic exclusive to a specific or elite group of teachers (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009); rather, it is regarded as a process that can be adopted and enacted by all teachers (Muijs & Harris, 2003). However, the literature indicates that teacher leaders tend to share certain common characteristics. Teacher leaders are generally noted to possess substantial teaching experience (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Notably, many of the qualities and skills of teacher leaders overlap significantly with those of effective teachers (Danielson, 2007). Information regarding the attributes of effective teacher leaders is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Qualities of Effective Teacher Leaders

Qualities	Supporting Studies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • York-Barr ve Duke (2004), Fairman ve Mackenzie (2012)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructional competence and expertise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Snell ve Swanson (2000), York-Barr ve

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Duke (2004), Danielson (2007), Firestone • ve Martinez (2007)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility, confidence, and openness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Snell ve Swanson (2000), Danielson (2007)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivation for professional development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fairman ve Mackenzie (2012)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitment to student learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fairman ve Mackenzie (2012)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition by colleagues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Snell ve Swanson (2000), Danielson (2007), Katzenmeyer ve Moller (2009)

Teacher leaders tend to be perceived as experts in their field (Danielson, 2007; Firestone & Martinez, 2007; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). These teachers are described as highly self-confident, open-minded (Danielson, 2007), flexible, and self-motivated individuals. In addition, teacher leaders are continuously focused on their professional development and are dedicated to the learning processes of their students (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012). In a two-year study conducted by Snell and Swanson (2000), observations of 10 teacher leaders revealed that trust, pedagogical expertise, collaboration skills, and flexibility were decisive factors in teachers assuming leadership positions.

Beycioğlu (2009) comparatively tabulated traditional teacher roles and teacher leader roles, and through this analysis, once again emphasized the importance of teacher leaders' collaborative, innovative, visionary, and pioneering qualities. This comparison is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparison of Traditional Teacher and Teacher Leader Roles

• Traditional Teacher Roles	Teacher Leader Roles
1. Prioritizes short term, urgent tasks and utilizes existing resources.	1. Sets long term goals aimed at transforming the existing education system.
2. Demonstrates limited or no collaboration within standard work processes.	2. Exhibits leadership and collaboration intended to bring about behavioral changes among colleagues.
3. Organizational responsibilities are largely confined to in class activities.	3. Tends to actively participate in all organizational activities and decision making processes.
4. Acts in accordance with the organization's existing cultural structures and norms.	4. Possesses the capacity to develop new approaches and meanings for the organization.
5. Supports the continuation of the existing hierarchical and autocratic structure.	5. Encourages changes in values and attitudes, using personal experience and modeling as leadership tools.
6. Adopts in-class achievement and competitive performance as primary goals.	6. Coordinates in-class and school-wide activities to enhance overall school success.

7. Engages in individual and isolated professional activities, showing reluctance to share.	7. Places importance on collaboration, knowledge sharing, and feedback processes among colleagues.
8. Derives in-class leadership authority from formal hierarchy and positional power.	8. In class leadership practices are informed by the classroom community and culture, and are effective within this context.

Individuals serving as teacher leaders are required to possess solid teaching experience and expertise. Teachers who are likely successful in classroom settings can more readily earn the respect and trust of their colleagues, which, in turn, provides them with opportunities to assume leadership roles.

Teacher leaders are individuals who prioritize and sustain their professional development. They are committed to continuously improving their own learning and skills. Effective communication is also a fundamental component of teacher leadership. Accordingly, teacher leaders create a collaborative environment by maintaining open communication with their colleagues and strengthening student–parent relationships. They guide and mentor their peers by sharing their experiences, which includes supporting new teachers, disseminating effective classroom strategies, and providing professional assistance to colleagues.

The ability to lead ongoing changes and innovations in education is considered a crucial element of teacher leadership. Teacher leaders take an active role in implementing new instructional methods and technological advancements and contribute to change processes within their schools. Moreover, they support and promote teamwork within the school. By collaborating with colleagues, teacher leaders enhance overall school success and provide creative and effective solutions to challenges, analyzing problems, developing strategies, and implementing solutions. Teacher leadership represents a model that extends beyond focusing solely on individual classroom success to improving overall school performance, while providing guidance to both students and colleagues.

In short, teacher leaders are not limited to senior teachers; they can include any teachers who are experienced, open to learning, and responsive to students. Teacher leaders are intrinsically motivated, open to innovation, skilled communicators, and inclined toward teamwork. They extend their leadership roles not only within their own classrooms but also across the school community. In conclusion, the concept of teacher leadership reflects a perspective that surpasses the traditional teacher role. It entails a proactive approach in which teachers assume leadership responsibilities within the classroom, at the school level, and in community interactions. This concept aims to enable teachers to adapt effectively to the continuously evolving and dynamic nature of the education system.

Why Is Teacher Leadership Necessary?

Relying solely on the principal as the instructional leader in a school makes it difficult to meet accountability requirements and to address existing demands related to student learning outcomes (Marsh, 2000; Pellicer & Anderson, 1995; Smylie, Conley & Marks, 2002). Teacher leadership practices, on the other hand, enable the development of a model that strengthens learning communities within schools and fosters a shared understanding of leadership. Furthermore, the absence of teacher leadership limits the creation of collective action plans aimed at enhancing student learning and effectively transforming schools.

Teacher leadership has been regarded as a fundamental element for achieving successful school reforms and enhancing teachers' professional expertise (Lieberman, Saxl & Miles, 1988). To maximize student learning outcomes, teachers must extend beyond their in-class roles, assume leadership responsibilities, and actively participate in school-based change processes (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Muijs & Harris, 2003). Although it is now widely accepted that teachers serve as a source of leadership within schools, there is no consensus in the literature on a precise definition of teacher leadership. For example, Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) define teacher leaders as individuals who exercise leadership both inside and outside the classroom, contribute to their colleagues, and assist them in improving their instructional practices. Similarly, Childs-Bowen, Moller, and Scrivner (2000) emphasize that teacher leaders provide leadership to enhance student learning, contribute to school improvement, and encourage stakeholder engagement in the educational process. Furthermore, John Gabriel (2005) describes teacher leaders as individuals who shape school culture, establish and sustain effective teams, and guide other teachers in ways that improve student learning.

Similarly, Troen and Boles (1994) characterized teacher leadership as a collaborative effort, noting that teacher leaders facilitate a cooperative process that supports all students' learning by helping their colleagues enhance their expertise and professional development. In addition, Wasley (1991) argued that teacher leaders can guide their colleagues toward change not only through collaboration but also through the arrangements and supportive interventions they implement, often encouraging peers to engage in activities they would not normally undertake in the absence of leadership influence.

Research has shown that teachers who participate in decision-making processes and engage in collaborative leadership with administrators contribute to instructional quality, improvements in student performance, and overall school effectiveness (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Ovando, 1996).

Similarly, numerous studies have demonstrated that empowered teachers and distributed leadership positively impact student performance and contribute to the professional learning of teacher leaders themselves (Lieberman, Saxl, & Miles, 2000; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). Furthermore, the collective capacity that emerges from pooling teachers' capabilities can be effective in addressing complex problems, managing ambiguous tasks, and developing new approaches to professional growth (Barth, 2001; Smylie & Brownlee Conyers, 1992).

Teacher leadership is not limited to empowering teachers through the decentralization of decision-making authority (distributed leadership); it also involves providing teachers with access to resources, information, and expertise to support their potential as innovators and their capacity to positively influence school change (Hallinger & Richardson, 1988). The implementation of teacher leadership is characterized as a shared and collective effort, in which all teachers can assume leadership roles at different times (Muijs & Harris, 2003). In identifying the core features of teacher leadership, it is emphasized that leadership is not confined to formal positions but rather extends across the entire educational community. In this context, the distributed leadership model offers a perspective on how leadership practices are shared and disseminated.

One of the most evident impacts of teacher leadership is the growth and learning that occurs among teacher leaders themselves. The concepts of learning and leadership are viewed as inseparable (Barth, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 1988; Ovando, 1996; Porter, 1986; Ryan, 1999). Opportunities to influence teaching and learning conditions through greater participation in decision-making have been shown to benefit both adults and children in schools, as well as

numerous successful teachers (Barth, 2001; Smylie & Brownlee-Conyers, 1992). In outlining the lifecycle of career teachers, Steffy, Wolfe, Pasch, and Enz (2000) indicated that as teachers progress in their careers, their contributions are expressed through finding opportunities for continuous learning and sources of renewal.

The primary rationale for promoting teacher leadership is often the benefits it generates. When democratic and participatory management practices are modeled, students not only observe and experience democratic leadership but also benefit from better-informed decisions made on their behalf. Moreover, it is assumed that when teachers learn, their students also learn (Barth, 2001).

Teacher leaders promote professional development by guiding and interacting with their colleagues. This enables teachers to strengthen their knowledge and skills, share best practices, and enhance the quality of instruction. Teacher leaders support and encourage teamwork both within and beyond the school, fostering a culture of collaboration, increasing cooperation, and enhancing the overall school climate. By sharing their experiences, teacher leaders provide guidance and mentorship, offering support to novice teachers while also contributing to the professional growth of their peers.

Teacher leaders advocate for innovative approaches to teaching and guide change, ensuring updates in educational processes and methodologies that improve student learning. Their leadership extends beyond the classroom to the school level, contributing to the school's overall goals and collaborating with school leadership to enhance student achievement. Effective teacher leadership can have a direct positive impact on student outcomes, as high-quality instruction increases student motivation and facilitates more meaningful learning experiences. Teacher leadership represents a model focused on the continuous improvement of the educational environment, making educational processes more effective and sustainable.

Ultimately, teacher leadership enables adaptation to the dynamic changes within the education system, strengthens collaboration among teachers, and serves as a bridge to improve student achievement, thereby enhancing overall educational quality. For these reasons, teacher leadership is recognized as a critical necessity in education.

Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

Teacher leaders are both educators and leaders. In the literature, the question “Who are teacher leaders?” is often answered by defining them as exemplary teachers with significant teaching experience and who are respected by their colleagues. Based on their ongoing research in schools focused on developing teacher leaders, Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) suggest that factors influencing a teacher's success affect their readiness to assume the roles and responsibilities of a teacher leader. Although not explicitly stated, many of these readiness factors implicitly assume that teachers already demonstrate a high level of instructional competence, implying that teacher leadership is most suitable for mid-career and mature teachers.

The literature identifies numerous reasons for developing the concept and practice of teacher leadership. It is evident that greater benefits arise when staff participate more actively in organizational management processes. Leadership by principals alone may be insufficient in schools; teachers' support is often necessary for leaders to fulfill their responsibilities. The most reliable, practical, immediate, and professional support is found within the teaching staff under the same school roof.

Perspectives from staff that can inform management and lead to more effective decisions should be taken into consideration. In education, teachers serve as frontline

practitioners, possessing critical knowledge about daily operations and interactions. Greater staff participation leads to more significant outcomes. When teachers are involved in the decision-making process, they become accountable for the decisions. They adopt the decisions, experience a sense of ownership, and consequently are more likely to see that the decisions are effectively implemented. If the objective is the implementation of curriculum and instruction, then classroom-level reforms are accompanied by an internalized sense of ownership and genuine commitment among the staff, namely teachers, who exercise leadership at this level. Teachers involved in decision-making regarding the conditions in which they work experience a greater sense of empowerment and are less likely to feel like passive victims.

Teachers are critical to educational reform because they possess firsthand knowledge of classroom-level issues and school culture. It must be recognized that improving teacher quality and advancing teaching and learning fundamentally depend on teacher expertise, and that such expertise becomes more widespread when effective teachers serve as models.

Effective instructional practices should help break teacher isolation and foster a more professional working environment through interactions such as sharing best practices, mentoring novice teachers, and collaborating with instructional colleagues. Clearly, teacher expertise in teaching and learning is essential to inform decisions and provide evidence-based guidance in instruction. In educational reform, meaningful transformation can be achieved by valuing teacher leadership, motivating teachers, and recognizing the contributions of successful educators.

In conclusion, teacher leadership should be regarded not only as a factor influencing individual teacher performance but also as a critical element that directly affects the overall functioning of schools, student learning, and the sustainability of educational reforms. In this context, enhancing teacher motivation, recognizing their expertise, and developing policies that support leadership roles are of vital importance for the future of education systems. Accordingly, it is essential that research on teacher leadership continues to advance.

In light of these informations, the following recommendations are proposed:

- ✓ It is recommended that more academic studies be conducted on teacher leadership.
- ✓ Studies could be carried out that gather the perspectives of administrators, teachers, students, and parents regarding teacher leadership.
- ✓ More comprehensive and mixed-method research could be conducted on the impact of teacher leadership on student achievement in schools.
- ✓ It is suggested that the necessary opportunities be provided for teachers to develop their leadership skills.
- ✓ Efforts should be made to recognize the importance of teacher leadership, motivate teachers, and reward successful teachers.

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