

**Exploring Teacher Leadership Across Cultures:
Introduction to Teacher Leadership
Themed Special Issue**

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Abstract	Article Info
<p><i>This editorial situates the special issue in the context of some of the dominant understandings of teacher leadership that appear in literature that spans several decades and includes comprehensive literature reviews. Then the origins of the International Study of Teacher Leadership are outlined and the process of forming a large international research team, developing research questions, and creating a study design is explained. This is followed by an overview of the articles in the special issue that present the findings from the first two stages of the International Study of Teacher Leadership, plus a report about teacher leadership in southeastern Mexico. The editorial concludes with a caution about the potential inappropriate use of the concept of teacher leadership across different contexts.</i></p>	<p>Article History: <i>Received</i> <i>August 15, 2020</i> <i>Accepted</i> <i>September 20, 2020</i></p> <hr/> <p>Keywords: <i>Teacher leadership,</i> <i>Cross-cultural</i> <i>research, Context.</i></p>

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Introduction

Teacher leadership has been an increasing focus for researchers' attention over the past three decades and beyond. In the eighties, Howey (1988) proposed that selected teachers might teach part-time and spend the remainder of their workdays working alongside other teachers to enable both teacher and student learning. Howey (1988) also proposed more flexible teacher career patterns that could include "curriculum redesign and articulation, organizational monitoring, pedagogical development, or collaborative action research" (p. 30).

In the nineties, Little (1995) shared the image of "contested ground" (p. 47) to describe the rise of leadership in schools based on subject expertise and on successful engagement with interdisciplinary planning initiatives rather than on hierarchical leadership appointments. Katzenmeyer & Moller (1996) profiled the influence of teachers who lead throughout their school communities by collaborating with colleagues to improve teaching and learning.

In 2003, Lambert made the often repeated and sometimes contested argument that all teachers can and should be leaders. She reasoned that educational leadership, power, and authority should be manifested beyond formal authority structures so that teachers can participate in the shared and reciprocal construction of meaning. Also in 2003, Harris offered the related view that teacher leadership plays an important function in school improvement by fostering leadership that is shared by teachers in service of common goals. Harris (2003) cautioned that not all teachers need serve as leaders and drew upon distributed leadership theory to outline how formal leaders can share responsibility and authority among teachers in their schools. She underscored how distributed leadership was accompanied by the



need for ongoing professional development for teachers so they can facilitate, mentor, and collaborate effectively.

York-Barr and Duke's (2004) review of the literature related to teacher leadership provided a comprehensive summary of its benefits, manifestations, and the supportive conditions that it requires. They highlighted the benefits of sharing expertise such as better decisions, greater commitment to collective goals, and students' social and academic development. York-Barr and Duke (2004) noted the underdeveloped or even absent definitions of teacher leadership in many reports that they reviewed. However, they also highlighted the connections made in the literature between teacher leadership and related conceptualizations of leadership such as participative leadership, distributed leadership, and parallel leadership. York-Barr and Duke (2004) included their observations of the professional and experiential background of individuals identified as teacher leaders. They described the relationships among teacher leadership, school culture, roles, and organizational structures. Reflecting Harris' (2003) identification of the need for professional development for teacher leaders, York-Barr and Duke (2004) reported how teacher leadership can be viewed from a career-long perspective. That is, partnerships between teacher education institutions and schools or districts can develop the leadership capacity of early-career and established teachers alike, as can workplace-embedded professional learning.

Wenner and Campbell (2017) added another important review of the teacher leadership literature. Their findings complemented and extended those shared earlier by York-Barr and Duke (2004). They too noted the lack of clarity in the definitions of teacher leadership that appeared in the literature and cautioned that this could result in

discrepancies between the research literature and how teacher leadership is applied in schools. Wenner and Campbell (2017) also observed that the teacher leadership literature did not consider sufficiently how teacher leadership relates to equity and diversity, nor did it explore idiosyncrasies among teachers working in different subject areas. Their review described how teacher leaders can experience tensions related to altered relationships with colleagues and administrators, and to time availability and workload. Importantly, Wenner and Campbell (2017) related how the increased interest in teacher leadership has led to it being a salient factor in school reform initiatives and teacher evaluations.

In another recent comprehensive review, Nguyen et al. (2019) explored patterns in how teacher leadership research has been conducted and they identified themes in the study findings. They observed a dramatic increase in the number of teacher leadership publications in recent years, reflecting the growing interest in the topic. They also noted that only two cross-national teacher leadership studies were undertaken between 2003 and 2017 and suggested there was a need for studies of teacher leadership in non-Western contexts.

A current review of teacher leadership research (Schott et al., 2020) also noted that teacher leadership is a factor in how teacher evaluations, professional development programs, and school reforms are designed and administered. As in previous reviews, Schott et al. (2020) reported a strong Western focus, particularly within the United States, but with some attention to teacher leadership in Asian countries. Schott et al. (2020) reported that their analyses suggested that many of the studies did not meet a desirable level of methodological quality.



The extensive reviews by York-Barr and Duke (2004), Nguyen et al. (2019), Wenner and Campbell (2017), and Schott et al. (2020) are important contributions to current understandings of teacher leadership. Each of the reviews used well explained strategies for analyzing the reports selected for inclusion in the research that was considered. The reviews noted the ongoing uncertainty about how teacher leadership can or should be defined, even while the interest in teacher leadership among educational researchers, practitioners, and policy makers has increased.

The widespread use of the term teacher leadership is well documented, and its influence is evident in formal expectations for teachers in a wide range of cultural contexts. It is unlikely that it is coincidental that some of the frequently stated attributes of teacher leaders appear in teaching standards and school improvement initiatives in several countries. For example, in Canada, the *Alberta Teaching Quality Standard* (2018) requires teachers to demonstrate respect and care for members of the school community, and to elicit confidence in their work from students, parents, and other educational partners. The *Professional Standards for British Columbia Educators* (2019) outlines expectations that teachers have responsibilities to foster public confidence in their work, to contribute to democracy in Canada, and to support truth, reconciliation, and healing with Indigenous peoples. The Australian *Professional Standards for Teachers* (2018) outlines a graduated professional profile that explicitly states that newly graduated teachers will work effectively with parents, colleagues, and community representatives and progress through career stages culminating in lead teachers who also represent their schools and their profession throughout their communities. The *South African Professional Teaching Standards Draft Announcement* (2020) details how teachers are to promote social

justice within their institutions and society, and how they are expected to collaborate with members of the school communities. The South African standards state that teachers are to earn the respect of community members and to maintain the dignity of the teaching profession. *Teachers' Standards* issued by the Department of Education in England (2013) highlight standards that must be reached in order to achieve qualified teacher status, standards that also are used to assess teacher performance and conduct throughout their careers.

Study Origins

It can be argued that despite teacher leadership not being well defined, it has a growing influence on teacher education, teaching standards, and teacher evaluations. This observation was discussed during a meeting among researchers from several countries who gathered in 2018 at an international conference hosted by Guangxi Normal University in Guilin, China. A major point that arose was the Western orientation of the understanding of teacher leadership and the need to explore teacher leadership in other contexts.

Participants in the meeting in Guilin used an earlier draft of the Webber article that is included in this special issue of *Research in Educational Administration and Leadership* (REAL) as a catalyst for discussing the viability of an international study of teacher leadership. Webber's (2018) discussion paper offered a rationale for the importance of teacher leadership and shared a summary of some of the attributes and indicators of teacher leadership evident in the literature. It also related teacher leadership to formal and informal leadership, school culture, professional development, and school improvement.



Following the meeting in Guilin, the initial group of researchers expanded its membership so that 10 countries are represented on the research team: Australia, Canada, China, Colombia, Mexico, Romania, South Africa, Spain, Tanzania, and Turkey. Interested colleagues met online over several months to develop overarching research questions and to design a five-stage study that began with a form of self-study to explore the understandings that team members bring to their collaboration. Other study stages include document analyses, interviews and questionnaires, case studies, and oral histories, all to be conducted in the 10 countries.

Themed Special Issue of REAL

The first stages of the ISTL are the phenomenographic analysis of research team members' understandings of teacher leadership and a document analysis conducted in the context of each research team member. These stages are meant to accomplish two things. First, the phenomenographic component allowed the team members to share their conceptions of teacher leadership that they bring to their collective work. The document analyses were designed to contextualize the exploration of teacher leadership within the various cultural settings of the researchers and to profile the explicit and implicit statements related to the attributes of teacher leadership. Both stages will inform the remaining components of the ISTL: interviews and questionnaires, case studies, and oral histories.

In the first article in this special issue of REAL focusing on teacher leadership, Webber shares an updated version of his 2018 discussion paper and provides more detail about how the research team decided to proceed with the *International Study of Teacher Leadership* (ISTL) (www.mru.ca/istl). This article offers a framework

for researching teacher leadership, presents the ISTL research questions, and describes the study design.

In the second article, Arden and Okoko share the results of the phenomenographic self-study that they conducted with 12 members of the ISTL researchers. They describe how they utilized mind mapping and semi-structured interviews to gain insights into how their fellow researchers relate to teacher leadership. The team members' conceptions of teacher leadership are described within three broad interrelated domains: (1) the school, school community, and formal education system, (2) the teacher-leader's professional self, and (3) the broader historical, socio-political and global contexts of teacher leadership.

In the third article, Pineda-Báez presents the findings of her analyses of documents in Colombia that focused on the recruitment, selection, and evaluation of teachers. She observed implied connections to teacher leadership in relation to pedagogical leadership, evaluation, peacebuilding, and diversity. However, there were few direct representations of teacher leadership in the documents and Pineda-Báez found that leadership was conceptualized mainly as a hierarchical phenomenon.

The fourth article reports how teacher leadership is conceptualized in the official documentation of educational organizations in South Africa. The analyses conducted by van der Vyver, Fuller, & Khumalo found that the documents referenced some of the attributes of teacher leadership found in Western literature but there was a stronger emphasis on cultural responsiveness and protection of human rights. The authors suggest that the relatively unique foci of teacher leadership in South Africa are the result of the historical, cultural, and socio-economic context of that nation.



Fierro-Evans and Fortoul-Ollivier provide a comparative analysis of educational policy documents focusing on leadership and teacher development in Spain, Colombia, and Mexico. Their analyses found limited references to teacher leadership per se, but the topic of reflection emerged as a focus within the documents in the three countries. They cautioned that reflection appears with different emphases and was described somewhat differently in each context. Nonetheless, the authors found that reflexivity offers insight and direction for teacher leadership development.

Kahler-Viene, Conway, and Andrews report the results of their analyses of educational documents at the national, state, regional, and local levels in Australia. They found differences in the dominance of various teacher leadership attributes at each of the four levels. Although accountability and advocacy for teacher leaders spanned the four levels, documents at the state level focused on professionalism and teamwork, while regional documents emphasized stability and inclusiveness.

A parallel analysis of institutional documents in Spain found that some attributes of teacher leadership appeared in government laws, teacher education programs, and school improvement proposals, but with an apparent limited understanding of the overall significance of teacher leadership. Gratacós, Ladrón de Guevara, and Rodriguez also observed few connections between principal and teacher leadership.

In the next article, Webber and Nickel report the results of their interrogation of the documentation of key educational stakeholders in Alberta, Canada. They observed six themes that related to teacher leadership: foundational understandings, student diversity, innovative curriculum and student engagement, community

engagement, 21st century competencies, and reflection and professional learning. They then identified several issues within the themes with the potential to challenge teacher leaders and used the challenges to derive a profile of teacher leaders who have the capacity to serve, influence, and thrive.

The collection of ISTL reports is complemented by a separate report that draws from three studies conducted in southeastern Mexico to describe conditions that facilitate and inhibit teacher leadership and professionalism. Cisneros-Cohernour describes how traditional power structures in schools have limited the success of educational reforms intended to strengthen the role and influence of teachers. She identifies the need for professional development for school administrators who seek to enhance their capacity to facilitate teacher leadership.

The articles in this special issue confirm that teacher leadership is more easily discerned in Western contexts like Canada and Australia. In other settings—Colombia, Mexico, South Africa, Spain—the attributes of teacher leadership were less obvious and stated more implicitly. They also addressed issues relevant to local contexts, such as correcting historical inequities and ameliorating the effects of civil strife. Further, it was evident in some contexts, such as Colombia, that hierarchical configurations served as the primary basis for enacting educational leadership.

Conclusion

The ISTL is intended to address the gap in understanding of teacher leadership across organizational and cultural contexts. Currently, teacher leadership is a term that is used in Western nations as if there is a widely shared understanding of what it is and what it



means for exercising influence and making decisions. Implicit meanings and competing assumptions about teacher leadership may contribute to uncertainty and confusion in school communities. Incorporation of teacher leadership in international policy making discussions without adequate consideration of contextual, organizational, historical, and cultural differences may lead to school community members struggling to accommodate the concept or, worse, ignoring other frameworks for facilitating more culturally appropriate decision making.

Calls for shared or distributed leadership among teachers, principals, parents, and students appeal intuitively to a commonsense desire to work collaboratively toward shared goals. Indeed, multiple researchers share the understanding that teachers are a key factor in school improvement. However, definitions of teacher leadership continue to evolve and the lack of clarity about the theoretical base of teacher leadership, its actual meaning, and how it is enacted is likely to limit its utility for enhancing academic outcomes and student wellbeing.

This special issue of REAL shares the findings of research conducted in North American, European, African, Latin-American, and Australasian contexts as part of the ISTL. The purpose of sharing the findings of document analyses conducted in different cultures is to contextualize idealized descriptions of teacher leadership. Future stages of the ISTL will permit the juxtaposition of what organizations say about teacher leadership with how the phenomenon actually is experienced by classroom teachers.

The importance of how teacher leadership is manifested in schools is more elevated now than ever. Educators are experiencing unprecedented technological change that has altered how students,

teachers, parents, and community members interact. The COVID-19 global pandemic has introduced additional complexities to the work of educators at the same time that concerns about historical injustices—e.g., Black Lives Matter, Indigenous rights, decolonization, sexual orientation and gender identity—have come to the fore. Teachers around the world also are immersed in the education of extraordinary numbers of children and their families who have migrated to seek refuge from violence, economic uncertainty, and climate change. The role of teacher leaders merits additional study because of the pressing need for ongoing improvements to teaching and learning, and also because of the centrality of teachers and education systems in the development and nurturing of civil societies.

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