

## **Building the “Bridge”: Teacher Leadership for Learning and Distributed Organizational Capacity for Instructional Improvement**

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In this article we clarify emergent constructs of teacher leadership for learning based on evidence of teacher leaders’ instructional leadership activities that contribute to schools’ organizational capacity for instructional improvement and learning. Theoretically grounded within distributed leadership, we used a systematic, configurative approach to analyze 39 studies published between 2003 and 2018. We found evidence of how teacher leaders build and maintain professional networks, build positive professional community and trust, and encourage professional growth. We accentuate the promise of “teacher leadership for learning” as a means to build organizational learning and capacity to improve instruction. We discuss implications for future research as researchers and practitioners continue to refine and apply leadership for learning activity within distributed leadership structures.

### **Introduction**

Effective instructional leadership guided by the concepts of school leadership for learning is second only to teachers’ instruction as one of the most influential factors that contribute to student learning and school improvement (Hallinger, 2011b; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Distributed school leadership among principals and teachers is an essential factor that contributes to school improvement and student achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 2011; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2004) described distributed leadership as a “perspective on the practice of school leadership that centers on the *how and why* [emphasis added] of leadership activity...beyond a consideration of the roles, strategies, and traits of the individuals” (p. 27). As one example of distributed leadership activity in school settings, teacher leadership practices have been researched and described from a variety of perspectives; as an informal, naturally occurring organizational phenomena (Portin, Russell, Samuelson, & Knapp, 2013), as well as an addendum to formal, structured hierarchical systems of leadership that continue to persist in schools (Holloway, Nielsen, & Saltmarsh, 2018; Margolis & Deul, 2009). Overall, previous research has called for additional clarity and empirical evidence of how distributed teacher leadership, “as a human capacity development strategy . . . has promise as a link to school improvement” (Mayrowitz, 2008, p. 432). However, across all model typologies of teacher leadership, there exists a lack of empirical evidence to identify and explain the ways in which teacher leaders engage in instructional leadership for learning within variable distributed, or shared leadership systems of practice (Duff & Islas, 2013; Ho & Ng, 2017; Mangin, 2007; McKenzie & Locke, 2014; Wenner & Campbell, 2017).

Through the application of existing models of instructional leadership for learning, there is an opportunity to leverage varied distributed leadership configurations and support teacher leaders' efforts to build organizational learning capacity for instructional improvement (Bryant, Escalante, & Selva, 2017; Hallinger & Heck, 2011; Harris, 2003; King & Bouchard, 2011; Lai & Cheung, 2015; Lambert, 2003/2005; Louis & Lee, 2016; Spillane & Louis, 2002).

Organizational learning capacity requires individual and group-level leadership for learning activities that are "fundamentally focused on improving the core technology of schools, that is, instruction" (Spillane & Louis, 2002, p. 100). In this article, we propose that organizational capacity and learning can act as the conceptual framework "bridge" to align teacher leadership for learning practices within varying levels of distributed school leadership implementation that are centrally focused on instructional leadership and improvement (Spillane & Louis, 2002, p. 95). To advance this framework, we investigated if and how empirical research has conceptualized instructional teacher leaders' roles and activities to facilitate leadership for learning within variable configurations of distributed practice.

The purpose of this systematic, configurative literature review was to understand how teacher leaders can position their leadership for learning activity to improve instruction within distributed school improvement systems. We focused on teacher leaders' instructional leadership for learning practices that can potentially build organizational learning capacity as a means to improve instruction and student learning. To guide our review, we addressed the following research question: How have teacher leaders enacted leadership for learning and instructional leadership activities in a distributed manner to develop or support organizational learning capacity for instructional improvement? We assert that the field of teacher leadership research has only begun to engage in more specific empirical investigations of teacher leaders' leadership for learning activities within multiple systems of hybridized distributed organizational leadership practice. This lack of specific focus on teacher leaders' leadership for learning practices potentially limits the impact of teacher leadership as a theoretical construct and as an organizational capacity lever to lead and influence instructional change. This structured literature review has the potential to impact future research and understanding of school leadership capacity building by identifying and analyzing gaps in our understanding of instructional teacher leadership that builds capacity for school-wide instructional leadership (Hallinger, Wang, & Chen, 2013; Lambert, 2002).

We utilized distributed leadership as a theoretical perspective to identify and analyze empirical evidence that contributes to our knowledge base regarding teacher leaders' abilities to influence schools' organizational learning capacity for instructional improvement. We situated our analysis of teacher leadership research and practice across two inter-related areas: 1) teachers' and teacher leaders' roles within distributed leadership models of leadership practice and 2) leadership for learning as a means to increase organizational capacity for instructional change.

## **Distributed Leadership and Teacher Leaders' Roles**

Research on applied distributed leadership theory primarily examines the leadership activities of organizational actors, and not their formal positions of authority or job responsibilities (Daly et al., 2010; Ho & Ng, 2017; Spillane, 2006; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001, 2004). Set apart from other conceptual ideas of leadership, distributed leadership models emphasize individuals' inherent leadership potential, their contextualized leadership activity, and their relationship exchanges as socially constructed leadership activity across the collective organization (Spillane et al., 2001). Researchers have also identified evidence that principals play a critical, supportive role in facilitating and encouraging teacher leadership as a distributed phenomenon (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015; Klar, 2012; Klar, Huggins, Hammonds, & Buskey, 2016; Margolis & Huggins, 2012; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; Pounder, 2006). In other cases, there exists deeply rooted hierarchical structures and cultures which reinforce the principal as the sole instructional leader, thereby minimizing teacher leaders' roles to potentially influence instructional growth (Klein et al., 2018; Nguyen & Hunter, 2018; Supovitz, 2018; Weiner & Woulfin, 2018).

Scholars have acknowledged that distributed systems of teacher and leader practices are often absorbed within existing hierarchical bureaucracies and contexts that predominantly include the principal position as the school building leader (King & Bouchard, 2011). Distributed leadership systems can include multiple configurations of teacher, teacher leader, and principal interactions and practices that can be hierarchical, flat, and reciprocal in nature and structure (Anderson, 2004; Hallinger, 2011; Hallinger, 2011b; Mulford & Silins, 2011). For example, King and Bouchard (2011) argued for a more relevant "hybrid" model that represents the contexts and "elements of both the bureaucracy and the learning community" (p. 658). They contend that although "pure" distributed leadership systems have been shown to influence how schools build organizational learning capacity, capacity building requires a balance of both "administrative control and active broad participation" among all participants in the teaching and learning community (p. 665). We applied a definition of distributed leadership that describes how teacher leaders and principals interact and engage in leadership activity "among a network of individuals . . . within a specific social and cultural context. . . [as a] collectively performed activity system" (Ho & Ng, 2017, p. 225). Bureaucracy is a fundamental aspect of schooling, and we assert that teacher leadership exists and grows within contextually dependent bureaucratic environments that persist in schools today. For many reasons, practitioners and researchers have grappled with the definitions of a "teacher leader," and as a result, this has generated conflicting discourse on the role and future of teacher leadership in schools.

**Teacher leadership definitions and models.** The roles and definitions of teacher leadership have evolved since the original notions of the "lead teacher," "teachers as leaders," and "teacher leadership opportunities" (Crowther & Olsen, 1997; Smylie & Denny, 1990). Most notably, researchers have identified theoretical and practical discrepancies between distributed school leadership theoretical constructs (Bolden, 2011; Harris et al., 2007; Mayrowitz, 2008; Mulford, 2008) and teacher leaders' leadership activities for school improvement (Harris, 2005; Jacobs et al., 2016; Mujsis & Harris, 2003; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). These discrepancies may be due to the variety of definitions used over time and the variability in teacher leadership models.

Some models have focused on the participatory elements of teacher leadership practice which enhance teacher leaders' roles to improve school culture and elevate teachers' professionalism (Fairman & MacKenzie, 2012). For example, in their study of 13 teachers and two paraprofessionals in Australia, Crowther and Olsen (1997) outlined a five-category framework of teacher leaders' activities: articulates clear views of a better world; models trust and sincerity, confronts structural barriers, builds networks of support, and nurtures a culture of success, with 18 sub-characteristics and behaviors (p. 11). In another example, Wenner and Campbell's (2017) prominent review of 54 published research articles on teacher leadership found five general themes that scholars have used to define teacher leadership: teacher leaders should exercise influence within and beyond classroom walls, teacher leaders should support professional learning in their schools, teacher leaders should be involved in decision making, teacher leaders should focus on student learning, and teacher leaders should work towards whole school and organizational change (p. 146). These models have described broad organizational goals which may improve professional practices and organizational culture, but are not centrally focused on instructional leadership activities.

Moving closer to specific instructional improvement and capacity building concepts, other models of teacher leadership have explicitly stated teacher leadership domains and competencies that define effective teacher leadership practices and behaviors (Smylie & Eckert, 2018). A diverse group of stakeholders created the Teacher Leader Model Standards (TLMS) brought together as the Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium (2011). The TLMS outlined seven domains of practice which are supported by 37 identified functions of teacher leadership practice. The TLMS domains include fostering collaborative culture to support educator development and student learning, accessing and using research to improve practice, promoting professional learning for continuous improvement, facilitating improvements in instruction and student learning, promoting the use of assessments for school and district improvement, improving outreach and collaboration with families and community, and advocating for student learning and the profession (TLMS, 2011). More recently, the Center for Teaching Quality (2014) published the Teacher Leadership Competencies (CTQ-TLC). Included in the CTQ-TLC model are four main competency areas: overarching, instructional leadership, policy leadership, and association leadership. Among these competencies, the model identifies 20 domains of practice that support teacher leadership development, reflection, and growth. Within these 20 domains, several indicators are attributed to "instructional leadership" practice, including coaching/mentoring, collaborative relationships, and community. These distinct perspectives and models of teacher leadership demonstrates how teacher leadership definitions and expectations are still evolving, but may not be centrally focused on classroom instruction improvement.

In consideration of the variety of teacher leadership perspectives and definitions, we drew on York-Barr and Duke's (2004) definition of teacher leadership as the process "by which teachers, individually or collectively, *influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement*" (emphasis added, p. 287). This definition aligns with more recent applications of leadership for learning, distributed leadership theory, and the importance of organizational learning and capacity to influence organizational leadership among all stakeholders and instructional change as two primary goals for school improvement (Smylie & Eckert, 2018).

## **Leadership for Learning and Organizational Capacity**

The most recent models of integrated instructional leadership, or leadership for learning, stress the vital role of collaborative, shared leadership in schools' efforts to improve instructional practices and increase organizational leadership capacity (Robinson et al., 2008; Marks & Printy, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 2010a/2010b). Although a lack of consensus exists regarding the particular leadership for learning domains that are the most salient to school improvement processes (Leithwood & Sun, 2012), there are core instructional leadership activities widely accepted as germane to instructional improvement processes.

While collaborative or shared leadership practices are not conceptual or theoretical equivalents to distributed leadership, they contain essential elements of a distributed leadership system, such as the collective leadership roles of all staff, a shared sense of purpose, contexts of leadership, sharing of power, and collaborative culture (Marks & Printy, 2003; Hallinger, 2003/2011). Instructional leaders should attend to core elements of instructional improvement, including setting mission, vision, and goals; managing curriculum and resources; supervising and evaluating teaching; monitoring student learning; and maintaining positive organizational climate (Hallinger, 2011). Leadership for learning emphasizes not only the role of the principal but the collective leadership capacity of all individuals to affect school-wide instructional improvement (Hallinger & Heck, 2010b). Also, principal leadership provides essential support to develop teacher leadership identities, practices, and processes (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; Pounder, 2006), which are essential for improved teaching and learning outcomes.

**Leadership for learning and organizational capacity.** Multiple definitions and models of leadership capacity exist (e.g. Cosner, 2009; Lambert, 2002; Lethwood & Mascall, 2008; Youngs, 2001; Youngs & King, 2002), however we focused our examination on organizational learning capacity within distributed leadership systems that involve the school improvement interactions of teachers, teacher leaders, and principals (King & Bouchard, 2011; Spillane & Louis, 2002). Individual and collective professional organizational growth is key to school improvement processes by considering “the kinds of leadership that can be distributed . . . to build internal capacity for development (Harris, 2004, p. 12-13). We drew on two main conceptual frameworks which focus on instructional leadership capacity and student learning (King & Bouchard, 2011; Spillane & Louis, 2002)

The first example, Spillane and Louis (2002) constructed a conceptual framework of school improvement that “anchors” instruction and student learning as the primary drivers of organizational learning and capacity (Spillane & Louis, 2002, p. 83). Organizational learning is a process where members adopt “new knowledge, skills, and tools . . . as a collective . . . [and] are engaged in a common activity . . . as an ensemble” (Spillane & Louis, 2002, p. 95). Spillane and Louis' work centrally positions student learning as the main purpose for building capacity to improve teachers' skills, classroom instruction, and professional community within distributed systems of practice.

Their first construct, instructional improvement, includes the interactions among several instructional processes, such as teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and understanding of students' needs and student learning processes. For example, these include how teachers employ certain elements in their instruction: knowledge about learner characteristics; teachers' assumptions and expectations about teaching and learning; content knowledge; pedagogy; curriculum; content-specific pedagogical knowledge; and application of learning theories and methods (Spillane & Louis, 2002).

Their second construct, school improvement structures and processes, includes the interactions within and across classrooms as a site of teacher learning and the levels and types of engagement within teachers' professional community. For example, these include how structures and professional interactions facilitate: shared instructional vision; developing a culture of shared beliefs, trust, and collaboration; allocation of resources; supporting teacher growth; and facilitating instructional supervision and mutual improvement among a professional community (Spillane & Louis, 2002).

The second example, King and Bouchard (2011) included distributed leadership in their model of school organizational learning capacity which subsequently influences school-wide instructional quality and student achievement. Their model outlines the reciprocal interactions among several elements of principal, teacher, and teacher leader behavior within distributed forms of leadership to improve teaching and learning "in ways that advance the collective work in their schools . . . exercised in an organized, collective enterprise" (King & Bouchard, 2011, p. 654-655). These elements include teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions; professional community; technical resources; and program coherence. In their model, teachers' growth requires increasing their knowledge of the essential functions of teaching: curriculum, planning, assessment, content knowledge, professionalism, high expectations for learners, and reflection. They framed professional community as a collaborative process where all stakeholders are accountable for goal setting and engaging in mutually shared problem-solving strategies. Linked closely is coherence and technical resources, described as the extent to which a school's goals are clear, reachable, and supported by capital, human, technology, and instructional resources.

### **Towards a Teacher Leadership for Learning Framework**

With a diverse application of approaches and definitions, teacher leadership researchers and practitioners continue to identify, define, and clarify domains of effective teacher leadership practices (Cosenza, 2013, 2015; Lowery-Moore, Latimer, & Villate, 2016; Smylie & Eckert, 2018; Teacher Leadership Model Standards, 2011). Despite evidence which demonstrates the importance of principals' leadership for learning practices, the roles and identities of teacher leaders working in distributed systems to build instructional leadership capacity remain unclear. We highlight contextual distinctions of school hierarchies that operate as "centralized bureaucratic enactments of power," while centering our attention on the distributed leadership for learning activities and interactions among individuals in those contexts (King & Bouchard, 2011, p. 666). Our theoretical and conceptual framework supports our empirical discussion of *how, why, and with whom* teacher leaders engage in leadership for learning practices within the contexts of distributed leadership environments.

Instead of searching for a definition, structure, place, or system to fit teacher leaders into existing organizational practices, we assert that teacher leaders should be the next generation of systemic instructional leaders. We propose that *teacher leadership for learning* can potentially serve as a conceptual bridge between hierarchical instructional leadership configurations which depend primarily on principal activity, and distributed leadership cultures which enable teacher leaders to build organizational capacity for instructional improvement.

## Methods

We utilized a systematic and configurative literature review approach to complete our analysis (Gough, et al., 2012; Hallinger, 2013). According to Gough et al. (2012), configurative reviews are theoretically-driven, iterative reviews that enable researchers to explore and clarify conceptual interpretations about the topic of interest. We followed Hallinger's (2013) structured literature review methodology to guide our procedures.

### Data Collection

We utilized a two-step approach to locate research articles. First, we bounded our search frame and established a codebook of terms for searching peer-reviewed, empirical articles within each area of our theoretical conceptual framework: distributed leadership, organizational learning and capacity, leadership for learning, and teacher leadership. Following a rationale similar to Wenner and Campbell (2017), we established the work of Spillane & Louis (2002), Spillane (2003), Spillane et al. (2003), and York-Barr and Duke (2004) as the starting point of our review. Thus far, the era from 2003-2018 represents the most intense research and potentially converging scholarly interest in distributed leadership, leadership for learning, teacher leadership, and organizational capacity (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). We used a priori terms based on cited characteristics and variations of each strand of our conceptual and theoretical framework and operationalized definitions to conduct Boolean searches using the online databases ProQuest<sup>TM</sup> and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC).

Second, we used the Google Scholar<sup>TM</sup> index of scholarly literature and a snowball sampling approach to locate additional article titles via in-text citations and articles' reference lists. We used three article selection criteria at this stage: 1) conceptual and theoretical relevance to the goals and selected framing of the review, 2) empirical in nature, and 3) the study sample of interest was primarily teacher leaders who were performing leadership activities with teachers and/or principals across variable organizational leadership hierarchy conditions. We located 168 articles during the first stage.

**Data evaluation and inclusion criteria.** We reviewed the 168 articles against several additional screening criteria. First, we included both qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods peer-reviewed studies and quality dissertations conducted across all international venues. We did not restrict sample sizes or particular methodologies.

Second, we reviewed five elements regarding the structures and organization of the articles to determine quality: 1) clearly stated research questions or purposes aligned with the review goals; 2) discussion of the theoretical or conceptual framework that included distributed leadership, instructional leadership/leadership for learning, and instructional leadership capacity; 3) articulated methods of data collection and analysis; 4) a discussion of results/findings, and 5) conclusions/implications. We include a synthesized methodological critique as part of our findings.

Third, we included studies of teacher leaders' leadership for learning and instructional leadership activity based on three leadership configurations: 1) teacher leaders' leadership for learning activity within distributed school improvement structures, 2) reciprocal instructional leadership exchanges and activity among and between teachers, teacher leaders, and principals, and 3) hierarchical or defined leadership structures with collectively expressed instructional leadership activity across principals, teacher leaders, and/or teachers.

Finally, we restricted our review to studies that discussed *how, why and with whom* individuals or networks of teachers, teacher leaders, and principals engaged in leadership for learning activities for school improvement. Through this process, we identified and included 39 peer-reviewed research articles or dissertations as part of the review.

### **Data Analysis**

As depicted by Creswell (2012) we followed a reflexive approach of examining and re-examining manuscript data that necessitated the use of both preconfigured and emergent code construction in the review database. We completed a staged content review that included textual evidence from a study's purpose, research questions, findings, discussion, and/or conclusion. We used the cloud-based Dedoose data analysis software to upload, store, and code our data contained in PDF article files. We utilized defined components from our literature review to complete an a priori synthesis of data with space to include emergent data until findings emerged that represented activity of teacher leaders' organizational capacity building (Creswell, 2012; Gough et al., 2012).

First, in stage one we created a codebook drawn from definitions and related terms included in our review of leadership for learning and instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 2010b) and teacher leadership (Crowther & Olsen, 1997; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). We completed multiple rounds of coding that started with a round of a priori coding based on our first codebook. We applied our a priori codes and then completed an additional round of open coding where we reread the articles to capture other terms and passages that were potentially related to our framework and codebook. Then, we discussed the open coded analysis to determine how to reconcile the a priori codes and open coded items to develop and determine a new set of coded items and categories to determine overall data patterns.

In stage two, we applied our distributed leadership theoretical framework (Ho & Ng, 2017; King & Bouchard, 2011; Spillane et al., 2001), that included indicators of teacher leaders' activities to build organizational learning and capacity for school improvement drawn from our literature review (King & Bouchard, 2011; Spillane & Louis, 2002). We compared our coded entries against our theoretical framework to determine to the extent to which our codes represented our framework, and to understand how theoretically-based codes were represented. We compared and reconciled codes into the most meaningful evidence that emerged as overarching points of conceptual emphasis in the literature. As portrayed in the findings section, our thematic analysis includes selected, supplemental conceptual literature and previous reviews

to explain and support our claims, as well as make connections to the broader scholarship regarding teacher leadership.

**Limitations.** Our analysis was not exhaustive of the breadth and depth of conceptual and non-peer reviewed literature contained within each of the strands identified in this review. Although we maintained a procedural approach in our analysis to enhance the levels of rigor, reliability, and validity, we acknowledge there is an inherent level of error at each stage of the research process brought upon by interpretive bias and analytical error.

## Findings

To review, we posed the guiding research question: How have teacher leaders enacted leadership for learning and instructional leadership activities in a distributed manner to develop or support organizational learning capacity for instructional improvement? We begin with a brief methodological analysis and discuss how the selected sample of studies situated and implemented their investigations of teacher leaders' instructional capacity building. Next, as part of our main findings, we present two emergent, thematic sections which demonstrate how scholars have discussed teacher leadership for learning and organizational capacity practices. In the first section, we discuss teacher leaders' social networks, communication, and how these activities create and maintain trust among all teachers in professional communities. Second, we discuss distributed leadership activities which focus on principals' instructional leadership and support of teacher leaders' instructional leadership activity, and teacher leaders' decision-making and diplomatic roles.

### Methodological Analysis

Few studies or reviews have purposefully analyzed teacher leaders' leadership for learning and instructional leadership practices through the lens of distributed leadership, either separate from or including the role of principal leadership and organizational leadership hierarchies that still exist in schools (Harris, 2003; Jacobs, Gordon, & Solis, 2016; Margolis & Huggins, 2012). The majority of studies reported emergent findings and discussion of concepts related to teacher leaders' leadership for learning, instructional leadership, and organizational capacity building, with some notable exceptions that focused on these areas (Cosner, 2009; Klar, 2012a, 2012b, 2013; Klar et al., 2016; Holloway et al., 2018; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Portin et al., 2013). As a line of inquiry, teacher leaders' instructional leadership and capacity building have not been a central feature of research in the field.

The sample of research studies also represents a diverse array of methodological approaches, including mixed methods, case studies, interviews, focus groups, document analysis, artifact analysis, phenomenology, Q-methodology, surveys, open-ended questionnaires, and structural equation modeling. These different investigations have provided a foundation of knowledge regarding teacher leaders' instructional leadership. Among the sample, 14 studies applied semi- or structured interviews, focus groups, and/or document analysis, which relied on participants' self-reported narrative responses and reflections on their practices. Twelve studies applied quantitative methodologies which were primarily large-scale surveys with regional or national samples (five), local surveys in one setting (one), mixed methods (three), and open-ended questionnaires or Q-sort methodology (three). However, among the 39 studies included in our review, 13 studies utilized research designs which supported the purposeful, direct

observation of principals', teacher leaders', and/or teachers' engagement and experiences with instructional leadership across different configurations. It is through more complex investigations which triangulate observational data, participant narratives, and organizational artifacts that enables researchers to provide evidence of teacher leaders' instructional activity and influence at the local level.

### **Distributed Social Networks, Communication, and Trust to Build Professional Community**

We discuss empirical evidence that describes the socially constructed and relational nature of teacher leaders' engagement in organizational learning capacity building. Previous research has emphasized how social networks offer individual and collective leadership structures of support for teacher leadership activities across varieties of distributed, hierarchical, centralized, or hybrid organizational leadership configurations. Instructional teacher leadership has presented as socially networked practices that focus on community development and communications among teachers, teacher leaders, and principals. The sample of studies we reviewed demonstrated how social and professional networks are essential structures to build trust, relationships, and collective trust among principals, teacher leaders, and teachers.

**Social networks and the contexts of teacher leadership.** The enactment of distributed instructional leadership networks is characterized by opportunities for teachers to participate in reflections of their instructional activities in a safe and collaborative culture (Blase & Blase, 2000; Kenjarski, 2015). Teacher leaders' and principals' leadership actions are socially situated and have aimed to develop favorable conditions for instructional practice reflection and reform, such as foster deep level social and professional exchanges, share and establish a community around a set of values and norms, and allow instructional teacher leaders to create professional sub-cultures focused on adult learning (Blase & Blase, 2000; Daly et al., 2010, Ghamrawi, 2013; Taylor et al., 2018). A central purpose of teacher leaders' activity is to develop relationships, encourage cooperation, and foster a professional culture of collaboration within existing hierarchical structures and leadership systems (Adams, 2013; Devo, Tuytens, & Hulpia, 2014; Ghamrawi, 2010). These interactions are intended to establish cultural and professional connections within the organization.

Instructional teacher leaders practice in complex school contexts where interpersonal skills, dispositions, and leadership skills are necessary to build bridges in social networks with a multitude of organizational, hierarchical, and professional contextual gaps (Burt, 2000; Klein et al., 2018; Lai & Cheung, 2015; Moolenaar & Slegers, 2015). Education leadership functions within a dynamic school culture, with actors determining elements of practice in the networked communities of which they invested time to develop professional connections and establish relationships with other actors (Daly et al., 2010). Among cross-contextual necessities, time must be established as a resource for educators to establish leadership mindsets, identities, and relationships to grow in their leadership activities that are bounded by complex social and professional contexts (Blase & Blase, 1999; Leithwood et al., 2007). The contextual features of schools constitute sociocultural systems in which distributed leadership practice takes place with rich networks yielding stronger professional communities and influencing student achievement (Daly et al., 2010; Lee, Hallinger, & Walker, 2012). Underscoring the importance of social context in school leadership and the engagement of instructional teacher leadership is the need for each educator to conceptualize the situations, artifacts, interactions of their leadership activity

(Harris, 2008; Spillane et. al., 2001). Social interactions and the resultant impacts on community and culture may be considered commodities of the contexts in which distributed instructional leadership is practiced (Adams, 2013; Forsyth, Adams & Hoy, 2011). A central feature of positive community and cultures are increased levels and quality of communications among principals, teachers, and teacher leaders.

**Communication.** Engaging in dialogue and opening lines of communications is essential to increasing teacher instructional leadership capacity in schools (Blase and Blase, 1999; Brezicha, Bergmark, and Mitra, 2015; Holloway et al., 2018). Teacher leaders communicate to coordinate instructional and professional development activity (Leithwood et al., 2007), identify and address problems (Angelle & Schmid, 2007; Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, 2007), and discuss instructional knowledge and practices with colleagues (Margolis & Deuel, 2009; Supovitz, 2018). Teacher leaders' instructional leadership communications include talking with teachers regarding professional reflection and growth through listening, sharing experiences, using demonstration, modeling, and giving praise, which facilitate positive cultures (Blase & Blase, 2000; Daly et al., 2010; Weiner & Woulfin, 2018). There is a belief among teachers, teacher leaders, and principals that teacher leaders can facilitate increased interactions between students and the faculty (Adams, 2013). The nature of teacher leaders' positions in hybridized configurations structures their work in both formal and informal ways.

Communication and instructional support structures of teacher leaders' and teachers' practices may not reflect formal, hierarchical leadership and role structures; rather the networks may be expressed informally through levels of professional and positional social capital among school-level actors in the organization (Daly et al., 2010, Moolenaar & Slegers, 2015). School district communications must increase to support principals' instructional leadership practice to understand better the mediating effects surrounding the support of teacher leaders' instructional leadership (Mangin, 2007). Improved communications are one of the main purposes for teacher leaders' work, which can empower more teachers to participate and share in leadership to improve student learning outcomes (Fairman & MacKenzie, 2015; Klar, 2012a, 2012b, 2013; Portin et al., 2013). Open and constructive communication develops professional trust among members of the organizational network which is essential for teacher leadership to take hold and influence instruction and professional practice.

**The role of trust and teacher leadership.** Trust among educators is essential for positive educator behaviors to permeate in the relationships necessary to maintain a positive school culture (Adams, 2013; Fairman & MacKenzie, 2015; McKenzie & Locke, 2014). Levels of professional trust are related to leadership behaviors that afford increased interaction time for meetings, professional development, and the establishment of transparent decision-making processes (Adams, 2013; Cosner, 2009). It is possible under successfully distributed configurations to extend responsibility and authority to all instructional leaders, promote trust, and work "among equals" (Blase & Blase, 1999, p. 492). School districts, through institution-wide trust building, and supportive *zones of enactment*, allow for effective communications essential for principal support of instructional teacher leadership (Mangin, 2007; Brezicha, Bergmark & Mitra, 2015). Teachers practicing as connected educators experiment with new strategies tapping internal collective expertise available within networked social and professional structures (i.e., professional learning communities, or PLC's) have identified trusting relations as essential to their work (Daly et al., 2010; Moolenaar, Daly, & Slegers, 2011). Faculty trust and

collective trust have been found to be indicators in the sustainability of quality teaching and learning among both principals' and teacher leaders' instructional leadership (Adams, 2013; Harris, 2008; King & Bouchard, 2011; Louis & Lee, 2016). Teacher leaders are crucial developers of mutual, intrapersonal and organizational trust which serve as goals foundations for teacher leaders' work within a professional community focused on instructional improvement and capacity building.

**Collective trust and professional community.** The role of the principal within social and organizational networks permits instructional leadership modeling to foster the treatment of educators with fairness and respect, reciprocated as *collective trust* expressed across the instructional improvement climate of the school (Adams, 2013; Burt, 2000; Ghamrawi, 2010; Handford & Leithwood, 2013). The focus of the social interactions underpinning collective trust is suggested to be with principals' capacity-building work (Cosner, 2009), with a need for deeper exploration of teacher leaders and teachers influence on trust-building practices in specific school contexts and high-stakes policy environments (Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Louis & Lee, 2016; Supovitz, 2018). There is potential to understand the actions and interactions between teacher leaders, teachers, and students as a wider social phenomenon and how they contribute to micro-level practices of building faculty trust and professional community (Adams, 2013; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Taylor et al., 2018). There is a belief that the bonds among principals, teacher leaders, and teachers will influence their individual and collective relationships with students, and elevate the school community (Angelle & Schmid, 2007). Teacher leaders' loyalty, commitment to children, and desire to improve a school's culture and a sense of purpose is a strong motivation to develop professional trust (Copland, 2003; Ghamrawi, 2010; Holloway et al., 2018; Kenjarski, 2015; Naicker, 2013) Trust is the social fabric that facilitates any aspect of individual or organizational change, including instructional improvement and capacity building. In the next section, we discuss how trust supports teacher leaders' instructional capacity building activities concerning distributed instructional leadership, diplomacy, and decision making.

### **Distributed Instructional Leadership Capacity, Diplomacy, and Decision Making**

Studies that investigated distributed instructional leadership illustrated that administrators were interested in instructional leadership practice as it pertained to the skills and dispositions of teacher leaders and teachers in complex leadership relationships. The body of literature of school leadership is already reflecting investigations with new social theory perspectives on the interactions of professionals contributing to leadership capacity building activity (Daly et al., 2010; Moolenaar, Daly, & Slegers, 2011; Portin, Russell, Samuelson, & Knapp, 2013; Scribner & Bradley-Levine, 2010; Smylie & Eckert, 2018). However, the literature shows that teacher leaders have the most significant influence on school norms, culture, and instructional processes when combined with a skillful implementation of effective principal leadership (Harris, 2008; King & Bouchard, 2011; Taylor et al., 2018). If teacher leaders are not situated structurally, symbolically, or socially as instructional leaders (Brezicha et al., 2015; Ghamrawi, 2010; Klar, 2013; Scribner & Bradley-Levine, 2010; Scribner et al., 2007; Weiner & Woulfin, 2018), then teacher leaders may be limited in their abilities to influence the instructional capacity as instructional leaders in their own right.

**Distributed instructional leadership capacity.** Principals and teacher leaders have constructed distributed leadership network configurations to build teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions for improved student outcomes (Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2008; Leithwood et al. 2007; McKenzie & Locke, 2014; King & Bouchard, 2011). Teacher leaders' and principals' efforts within distributed configurations are related to co-constructed or mutually coproduced instructional leadership practices as mutual actors in social contexts (Brezicha, Bergmark, & Mitra, 2015; Spillane & Kim, 2012). An impact of social networking activity can be informative using the constructs of social theory which analyze *density*, *rate of interaction*, and *centrality* of teacher leaders', principals', and teachers' interactions and focus on instructional leadership activity (Daly et al., 2010; Portin et al., 2013). Principals and teachers can be instructional co-leaders to meet needs of work-related matters necessary to reach organizational goals by "brokering social connections across structural holes" (Burt, 2000, p. 364; Copland, 2003; McKenzie & Locke, 2014; Moolenaar, Daly, & Slegers, 2011). Despite the promise of distributed leadership, the constructions of teacher leadership behavior remain "... legitimized by particular institutional, organizational, and sociocultural rules" (Scribner & Bradley-Levine, 2010, p. 515; Taylor et al., 2018; Weiner & Woulfin, 2018). The diffusing of instructional teacher practice though socially constructed organizational systems requires teacher leaders and teachers to be able to step outside of networks governed by traditional or conventional *social categorizations* (Brezicha, Bergmark & Mitra, 2015; Cosner, 2009; Spillane et al., 1999).

The complex social systems in diverse school cultures present challenges that principal instructional leaders need assistance with in order to support instructional teacher leaders (McKenzie & Locke, 2014). An effective instructional principal leader situates oneself as a central facilitator among multiple types of distributed configurations and contexts to develop and sustain organizational and institutional environments conducive of distributed instructional leadership (Scribner & Bradley-Levine, 2010). The distribution of teacher leader instructional leadership practice is legitimized by principals' behavior fostering social networks beyond conventional classroom contexts (Cosner, 2009). Leadership that is spread, or *stretched*, across educator governing groups, liaisons groups, parents, and students may provide arenas for interdependent, yet dispersed leadership and is a strategy that is conducive to increased student performance (McKenzie & Locke, 2014; Spillane, 2015). The principal instructional leader may exercise professional influence to support teacher leaders' and teachers' professional network activity, which may, in turn, increase their instructional capacity as principals (Daly et al., 2010; Moolenaar, Daly, & Slegers, 2011). In the next section, we discuss how principals both support and empower teacher leaders' as leaders for learning.

**Principal support for instructional teacher leader activity.** Instructional leadership research has extended its breadth to include principal instructional leadership practices and interactions supporting or constraining distributed instructional leadership practices among organizational actors inclusive of teacher leaders (Mangin, 2009; Scribner & Bradley-Levine, 2010). There is a core belief shared among principals and teacher leaders that collaborative, shared, and distributed instructional leadership can improve teachers' growth, and subsequently, student learning and achievement (Fairman & MacKenzie, 2012, 2015; Klar et al., 2016; Klein et al., 2018; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Nguyen & Cheung, 2018; Supovitz, 2018). Teacher leaders' intellectual resources, skills, and dispositions need to be supported by the principal instructional leader (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001; McKenzie and Locke, 2014; Mangin 2009; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Lee, Hallinger, & Walker, 2012). Supports for

instructional teacher leadership many include “emotional, financial, material, or symbolic support” and may originate from various places in the organization in a socially networked environment (Mangin, 2007, p.352). Principals should provide support for instructional teacher leadership activities between teachers and teacher leaders such as listening, sharing experiences, and modeling which generates a sense of common purpose championed by the school leader (Blase & Blase, 2000; Ghamrawi, 2010; Kenjarski, 2015; Klein et al., 2018; Mangin, 2007; McKenzie & Locke, 2014). Principal instructional leaders are central to facilitating and enabling efficient and meaningful interactions that support instructional teacher leader practice in social networks (Blase & Blase, 2000; Daly et al., 2010; Moolenaar & Slegers, 2015). The interactions are situated across units, levels, and departments and are characterized by situational leadership through an understanding of overlapping responsibilities (Lee, Hallinger, & Walker, 2012).

**Teacher leaders’ instructional leadership activities.** Studies of teacher leaders’ and principals’ instructional leadership interactions and activities have revealed what instructional leadership practices do occur within distributed configurations (Brezicha, Bergmark, and Mitra, 2015; Devos, Tuytens, & Hulpia, 2014; Hallinger, 1983; Hallinger & Heck, 2011; King & Bouchard, 2011; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). Practices exhibited by effective instructional teacher leaders include instructional coaching, engaging in reflective conversations, curriculum, and the study of teaching and learning (Blase & Blase, 2000; Fairman & McKenzie, 2015; Kenjarski, 2015; Supovitz, 2018; Weiner & Woulfin, 2018). Effective discourse among educators extends instructional teacher leadership activity to broaden and strengthen teachers’ participation in peer coaching, collegial study groups, community liaison representation, policy advocacy, and professional identity development (Blase & Blase, 2000; Ghamrawi & Al-Jammal, 2013; Margolis & Deuel, 2009). However, our review shows that more research is needed to understand relationships between distributed leadership configurations and instructional improvement that detail the various macro- and micro-level instructional teacher leadership activity (Daly et al., 2010; Moolenaar, Daly, & Slegers, 2011; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001; Spillane & Kim, 2012). Little research currently exists on effective leadership strategies in support of teachers’ skills contributing to building capacity for school instructional leadership (Blase & Blase, 1999; Brezicha, Bergmark, & Mitra, 2015; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Supovitz, 2018). One way that principals can empower teacher leaders and teachers is through participatory activities such as problem-solving and decision-making.

**Diplomacy and participative decision making.** Teacher leaders and teachers are essential participants to create a shared commitment to the school’s development of *participative* leadership associated with the precursor of distributed leadership (Devos, Tuytens, & Hulpia, 2014; Heck and Hallinger, 1999). Teacher leaders’ practice of instructional leadership requires reductions in teacher leaders’ scheduled instructional loads and to include them in professional dialog about vision building and instructional experimentation (Ghamrawi, 2013; Kenjarski, 2015). Teacher leadership practices may involve brokering relations among staff, being representatives regarding external school governance, and maintaining relations with external stakeholders (Scribner et al., 2007; Spillane & Kim, 2012). A multitude of teacher experiences lend to their potential to engage in the practice of teacher leadership including the teaching of adults, dealing with conflict, and aligning philosophical perspectives with collective school vision (Angelle & Schmid, 2007; Brezicha, Bergmark, & Mitra, 2015; McKenzie & Locke, 2014). However, the evidence demonstrates that in many contexts teacher leaders are not

empowered to make decisions in response to conflict, planning, or coordinating school improvement efforts.

Instructional teacher leaders' knowledge, skills, and dispositions are contributing factors to engage them in decision-making processes (Blase and Blase, 1999; King & Bouchard, 2011; Naicker & Mestry, 2013). Teacher leaders, indeed, all teachers should be involved in collective decision making as a means to accomplish organizational goals (Devos, Tuytens, & Hulpia, 2014; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Spillane & Kim, 2012). Teacher leaders aspire to contribute to the decision making processes in their school, but express frustration within highly collaborative environments designed to improve instruction due to lack of influence in decision making and competing purposes or agendas that limit their roles (Angelle & Schmid, 2007; Holloway et al., 2018; Margolis & Huggins, 2012; McKenzie & Locke, 2014; Weiner & Woulfin, 2018). The relationship between teacher leadership practice and involvement in decision making positively affects professional culture as reported by researchers in the US and England (Harris & Muljus, 2002; Harris, 2008), Hong Kong (Lai & Cheung, 2015), and South Africa (Naicker & Mestry, 2013). Teacher leaders' roles have not developed to the point where they are empowered to make decisions on an organizational level, which is indicative of our overall findings regarding the research on teacher leaders' instructional leadership activity.

### **Summary of Findings**

Inclusive of our methodological analysis, our findings revealed emerging, but not substantive, empirical evidence regarding teacher leaders' instructional leadership activity and capacity building to improve instruction. Evidence demonstrates that teacher leaders have been utilized to improve professional school culture, acted as brokers of information and communication liaisons, and served as instructional collaborators and confidants. However, both empirically and methodologically, the field needs to define what *teacher leadership for learning* is, and then demonstrate evidence *how teacher leaders impact instructional capacity and improvement*. That evidence is elusive, as instructional leadership practices have yet to be consistently dispersed across actors within hierarchically bound school systems, allowing for teacher leaders to fulfill their potential as capacity builders and instructional change agents. It is through deeper investigations of teacher leadership for learning practices that we will be able to identify and clarify the potential strengths and limitations of teacher leaders' instructional leadership capabilities.

### **Discussion and Recommendations for Future Research**

To review, informed by the theoretical perspectives of distributed leadership, leadership for learning, and organizational capacity, we analyzed empirical evidence of *how, why, and with whom* teacher leaders engaged in leadership for learning practices. Studies have investigated *how*, and *with whom*, with limited investigations that focused on *why* teacher leaders engage in instructional leadership. Methodologically, the field has relied heavily on self-reported survey data, qualitative interview narratives, document analysis, and focus group accounts of principals' and teacher leaders' instructional leadership and capacity building activities, which calls into question evidentiary claims regarding teacher leaders' ability to build instructional capacity for improvement. As a field of knowledge, we need to provide more substantive, observational and/or measurable evidence of teacher leaders' impact on teachers' instruction and professional growth.

With that in mind, our analysis revealed several emergent themes. Research demonstrates the importance of teacher leaders' social networks and communication, emphasizing how these activities create and maintain trust and collective trust among teachers in professional communities. Also, principals' instructional leadership and support for teacher leaders' instructional leadership activity, and teacher leaders' decision-making and diplomatic roles, appear to be valued by practitioners but have not been implemented or researched in robust or meaningful ways. Next, drawing from our thematic findings and previously cited evidence, we summarize and discuss *how, why, and with whom* teacher leaders engage in leadership for learning practices to build organizational capacity within the contexts of distributed leadership environments. We also discuss several recommendations for future research.

### **How Teacher Leaders Engage in Leadership for Learning Practices**

There remain significant distinctions between how stakeholders and scholars aspire to utilize teacher leadership in broad, influential ways to build capacity, and what instructional leadership and capacity building efforts teacher leaders' are actually engaged in. The empirical evidence shows that teacher leaders' influence on teaching practice may be limited to several main areas of organizational and leadership practice, such as culture, communication, relationships, and collegiality. If we compare our evidenced-based analysis to published models of teacher leadership practice (e.g., CTQ-TLC and TLMS), there is a limited documented evidence of teacher leaders' model instructional leadership behaviors (e.g., mentoring, coaching, collaborating, improving professional culture, promoting reflection, implement new initiatives), and if these behaviors are having an impact on instruction, instructional decisions, visioning, or instructional planning. In this case, we argue that form follows function, and if we position teacher leaders as peer-instructional leaders that enact leadership as assistants to the administrative leadership, then we question if teacher leadership for learning will actually materialize in practice. This disconnect between published models of teacher leader instructional leadership practice and empirical evidence from the field also problematizes teacher leaders' and principals' primary reasons for engaging in teacher leadership work.

### **Why Teacher Leaders Engage in Leadership for Learning Practices**

With much of the teacher leadership research absent of formal, hierarchical leadership titles and based on embedded practices and activity, it is the "why" of teachers choosing specific instructional teacher leadership practices that remains the research fields' *blind spot* (Pounder 2006, Neumerski, 2012; Spillane 2015; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Overall, there is an overall belief among principals, teacher leaders, and teachers, that teacher leaders' instructional leadership will impact students' learning and experiences. Teacher leaders demonstrate their commitment to improve open communication and shared dialogue among faculty and administration. They intend to build trust with individual teachers, and as an organization through building a sense of collective trust. Teacher leaders and principals alike believe that trust is a foundation for developing professional community focused on improving student learning. Together, principals and teacher leaders also aspire to enact organizational change through instructional growth, decision making collaboratively and stronger professional networks, however, current structural realities and hierarchies in schools have prevented teacher leaders from realizing their potential.

### **With Whom Teacher Leaders Engage in Leadership for Learning Practices**

We found evidence of convergent activity configurations among leadership for learning and distributed leadership practices. This evidence is reflective of the emergence of a *fourth wave* of teacher leadership, identifiable with movement away from formal titles of leadership and delegated responsibilities and its conventional practice and organization in schools (Pounder, 2006). However, recent studies also demonstrate how policymakers and districts are prescribing hierarchical, or quasi-hierarchical, teacher leadership systems which could disrupt the organic spirit of distributed leadership theories in practice (Bush, 2018; Holloway et al., 2018; Supovitz, 2018). There is evidence of professional and organizational tension within distributed systems of practice which rely on traditional, hierarchical models of administrative control and bureaucracy (Supovitz, 2018). While principal support appears to be essential to teacher leadership practice, principals and teacher leaders demonstrate uncertainty regarding how to transform organizational behavior conditioning and structures which position principals as the primary instructional leaders.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Research has focused heavily on teacher leaders' social and relational aspects of school-culture building and common attributes of shared teacher professionalism. Teacher leaders have played a pivotal role in developing socially and structurally supportive professional social networks, trust, and collaboration among teachers and principals alike. Our analysis found that collective leadership across multiple variations of distributed systems form a potential framework of support for teacher leaders' organizational learning and capacity building activity. However, more research studies on the specific leadership for learning and instructional leadership actions of teacher leaders within variations of distributed systems of leadership networks of practice are warranted. As a field, teacher leadership research would benefit from more specific investigations regarding how, with whom, and particularly *why* teacher leaders enact leadership for learning activities to influence organizational capacity regarding instructional leadership and improvement activity in schools. Teacher leaders' goals, motivations, and behaviors continue to be bound by traditional norms, routines, and expectations, which limits their potential to be innovators or change agents.

Researchers should consider contextual studies which employ methodologies that can observe and document evidence of teacher leaders' instructional leadership activities and subsequent impacts to improve teaching. Such methodologies could include embedded case studies, ethnography, and other research designs that include participant observations of teacher leaders' and teachers practice. Although existing research has contributed significant knowledge of teacher leaders', teachers' and principals' perceptions or descriptions of practice, these methodologies, and associated theoretical perspectives have not provided substantive evidence of teacher leaders' instructional leadership behaviors in context.

## Conclusion

The conceptualization of teacher leadership as a distributed organizational framework for professional practice, and the practical, focused implementation of instructional teacher leadership, are misaligned at present. There is considerable evidence of the teacher leaders' role to build and maintain a professional culture, a sense of social cohesion, and professional trust among teachers. Supportive, effective principal instructional leaders who facilitate professional space and provide resources and time for teacher leaders are also essential, organizationally networked actors that elevate teacher leaders' ability to build social standing and respect among teachers. Findings on instructional teacher leadership behavior situated as a distributed leadership practice include varied levels of instructional coaching, developing supportive networks for collegial dialogue, and developing positive cultures based on mutual trust and safety. However, methodological and empirical limitations constrain scholars' claims that teacher leaders are instructional leaders and impact teachers' practices. A paradigm shift is required which elevates teacher leaders as inherent instructional leaders within school organizations.

To reinforce our theoretical perspective and metaphor, organizational capacity for instructional improvement should be the conceptual "bridge" that connects teacher leaders more intentionally with instructional leadership. As a purposeful and embedded concept within school leadership practice, *teacher leadership for learning* can transform schools into dynamic leadership organizations reflective of organic professional learning community environments. We argue that in order for teacher leadership to reach its full potential as a mechanism for instructional capacity building and improvement, we need to provide more evidence of teacher leaders' instructional leadership to substantiate schools' investment in such models of practice. Within school organizations, district- and building level leaders need to embrace the concept of teacher leadership for learning, which requires symbolic, structural, resource, and cultural shifts to properly elevate and utilize teacher leaders as the primary, systemic instructional leaders of the future.

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