

Chapter 12: What's in a name? Finding ways to articulate leadership by teachers

Susan Lovett

Making sense of teacher leadership: Why it matters

As teachers begin to develop confidence in teaching, career questions of 'what next?' typically surface. Leadership work is one possibility. However, whether early career teachers aspire to leadership work, I argue, depends on conceptions of what it means to lead and engage in leadership activity. Such conceptions are often shaped by the kind of leadership an early career teacher has experienced over time. Those contemplating options for new motivations and challenges, will, I suggest, be reconciling what they have gleaned from their experiences and observations (both positive and negative) as they give consideration to their own decisions about engagement in leadership.

Making sense of conceptions of teacher leadership is the focus of this chapter, drawing upon research and scholarly writing to convey the ways in which this field of study has gained momentum and where it is currently moving. Work to enhance the appeal of leadership work is needed to ensure teachers want to become leaders. Illustrative examples drawn from participants in a New Zealand study, *Teachers of Promise*, show the need for more clarity regarding the scope of leadership influence, who counts as a leader, and the work understood as teacher leadership. An overview of scholarly literature surveying the field of teacher leadership from work undertaken in different countries provides evidence that the call for clarity in terminology about teacher leadership is of international concern. As an introduction a New Zealand study is used to highlight what teachers themselves say about what constitutes teacher leadership.

Evidence close to home: Teachers of Promise (TOP) study in Aotearoa New Zealand

Views about teacher leadership were sought as part of data gathering for a large New Zealand longitudinal study of 57 primary and secondary teachers. The teachers in the study were purposively selected from graduates of the country's initial teacher education programmes in 2003. They were described as teachers the profession ought not to lose. Participant selection as 'promising' prospects (hence the study's name, *Teachers of Promise*) was based on the endorsement they had received from both their initial teacher education provider and employer once appointed to a school. A fuller account of the study's design can be found in Cameron, Baker, and Lovett (2006) and Lovett (2007). The impetus for TOP was to find out the reasons for newly qualified teachers' decisions to stay in their schools, move schools, or leave teaching. Of particular interest were matters of job satisfaction, commitment, professional learning, and the development of expertise. Data from surveys and interviews were gathered on four occasions from 2005–11 to capture these teachers' personal experiences and movements within, across, and beyond schools. In 2016, five of these teachers participated in a further interview to explore the concepts 'teacher leader' and 'teacher leadership'. The specific focus on leadership was made because of a curiosity to see what had shaped their decisions about whether to lead or not and the scope of their leadership work.

The 2016 interviews began with a question probing the teachers' views about the existence of teacher leadership in practice. This question proved to be a difficult opener because the teachers were uncertain about the terminology. Their uncertainty brought into focus "the difficulty of

having leadership terms which acknowledge the status or leader type as well as the work undertaken as leadership” (Lovett, 2018, p. 117). Put simply, this was about two opposing stances on leadership. While one could be undertaken within a formal position, the other was possible without being associated with a designated position. The scope of leadership work enacted by these five teachers reflected different motivations and aspirations. Despite their firm commitment to students and learning, their careers had unfolded in different ways. Two of the five (Jack and Robyn) had moved in an upward trajectory through the named positions of head of department and/or pastoral care (deaning) to reach the senior leadership team as assistant or associate principal. Jack realised that management units defined leadership work. He noted schools used management units to draw teachers into leadership work and that these were signals of leadership potential and experience. Robyn’s initial leadership work recognised her curriculum expertise in her appointment to a head of department position. This was followed by roles focusing on assessment, accountability, and compliance as she moved closer to the senior leadership team. She did, however, acknowledge that leadership could occur outside formal positions but, at the same time, did not know what to call informal leadership.

Two others interviewed, Steven and Ruby, held formal leadership positions as heads of department yet were not looking towards a principalship or membership of a senior leadership team. Steven had dismissed an upward career trajectory despite having begun preparatory study with his enrolment in a postgraduate educational leadership programme. He gave job intensification as a reason why he had decided not to pursue his earlier aspiration of moving upwards in the hierarchy. Ruby contrasted her role as head of department with her other role in the position of specialist classroom teacher. Her preference was for the latter. Being a specialist classroom teacher meant she could lead and learn at the same time. Her leadership came from working alongside colleagues to address matters of classroom learning. It was not coloured by concerns for accountability and compliance and reporting to the senior leaders in the school. Rather, she was able to develop learner-to-learner relationships with her colleagues through their mutual interest in students’ learning and sharing puzzles of practice.

Interestingly, Ruby expressed some disquiet about being acknowledged as a leader. For her, being called a ‘leader’ was associated with having superior status over colleagues. This was not how she wished to be seen. Instead, she was attracted to the combination of being a teacher, a learner, and a leader. This she explained in terms of the benefits possible when she moved beyond her own classroom to influence and support colleagues which often necessitated new learning for her as she considered how to help her colleagues. This learning, tied to leadership work, provided fresh challenges and stimulation for Ruby. What is interesting from her account of her leadership experience, both as head of department and specialist classroom teacher, is that it was accommodated through the appointments to two named, formal positions.

The remaining teacher, Rose, was a classroom teacher. She did not consider herself to be a teacher leader at all. Her strength was her most recent experience teaching in a bilingual unit where she described herself as an advocate but not a leader. Again, the absence of a formal title serves to reinforce the dominance of leadership as position rather than leadership as activity or the work done in the flow of everyday practice with colleagues.

Seven key messages emerged from my additional interviews with these five teachers who all struggled in different ways to articulate what teacher leadership actually meant. These matters point to difficulties in the terminology used, and how leadership by teachers is supported and valued in schools as an individual or collective pursuit. A fuller account of the seven matters is reported in Lovett (2018). In essence, these matters are:

1. the continuing perception that leadership occurs through a role taken in a named position
2. reluctance amongst some teachers to become leaders
3. teacher leadership is seen to involve personal risks, and requires courage and supportive colleagues
4. teachers' classroom leadership can be invisible
5. the moral obligation to enhance students' learning attracts classroom teachers into leadership work without necessarily knowing they are leading their colleagues (this type of leadership is collective rather than individual activity)
6. teacher leaders can provide clear evidence of their impact on students' and colleagues' work
7. teacher leaders see their work as remaining connected to classrooms.

I now move from my brief overview of five teachers' career pathways, aspirations, and experiences of leadership and their attempts at articulating the scope of teacher leadership work to highlight how the scholarly literature from three other countries regards the concept of teacher leadership.

Conceptualising teacher leadership: An international search for clarity in terminology

Entitling a book in the nineties as *Awakening the Sleeping Giant* suggested that the concept of teacher leadership was not sufficiently recognised and understood two decades ago (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 1996). Even today, this is in part due to the looseness of the term 'teacher leadership', a term Fairman and Mackenzie (2015) suggest might even be counterproductive. As an umbrella term, according to Neumerski (2013), teacher leadership captures both formal and informal leadership by teachers but the combination gives more recognition to leadership within a named position held by an individual than to a broader organisational quality to which there may be many contributors. Ogawa and Bossert (1995) suggest when leadership is viewed as an organisational quality, it can occur anywhere regardless of an individual's status. The notion of anyone being capable of leadership work is inviting and inclusive but, at the same time, contributes to the difficulty in specifying the scope of that work, especially when it may not be associated with a designated leadership position. Informal leadership is harder to recognise because teachers may share their expertise at different times without necessarily seeing themselves as leaders. Silva, Gimbert, and Nolan (2000) relate this quality to the ways teachers come together to explore what works for students and their learning without the trappings of work labelled as leadership and confined to people with particular titles.

An alternative to formal leadership or leadership as position, is to think of leadership as collective work to which many can contribute depending on their expertise and inclination. This view is more about the work to be done in achieving the moral purpose of schooling—namely improving students' learning and achievement—than the status of a leader as an individual. It enables a distinction between the terms 'leader' and 'leadership' to be made which I find helpful. Thus, the connection can be made between leadership actions for the improvement of teaching outside designated positions emphasising how being a leader need not mean increasing the distance from classroom teaching. Cherkowski and Bradley-Levine (2018) refer to the concept of teacher leadership becoming "inextricably merged with continuous improvement of teaching and learning, and with more active participation sought by and for teachers in shaping, through their leadership, the learning culture of the school" (p. 1).

While the terms ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ leadership have been used to acknowledge the scope of leadership possible by teachers, this has not necessarily enhanced the understanding of what teacher leadership is about. Simpson’s (2016) work to devise a three-part typology for leadership based on the earlier work of Dewey and Bentley (1949) goes some way towards explaining the different conceptions of leadership and recent thinking. One conception is to view leadership as ‘self-action’ recognising what an individual does in the capacity of the positional leader. This, as discussed earlier, is the firmly entrenched view surfacing again showing leadership in positional terms. A second conception is to think in terms of leadership as a set of practices where ‘inter-actions’ matter. This is typically when leadership is distributed so as to harness collective capacities and through which dialogue occurs between leaders and followers. The notion of leadership being ‘distributed’ nevertheless signals that leadership is contingent on what another leader allows to occur. A third and further conception of leadership in the flow of practice recognises the need for power with others, not over others. Here leadership is not hemmed in by formal hierarchies. It is instead emergent, spontaneous, unanticipated, and amongst peers, or to use the terminology explored so far in this chapter, progressing notions of informal and non-positional leadership expressed through the activities arising in practice as colleagues come together to solve issues of practice.

The literature to this point has underscored matters that, when taken together, lead to a contested or confused view of teacher leadership. From my reading, a first point to note is that leadership work is not dependent on having a designated position, title, or role. However, this broadening of what counts as leadership work contributes to the difficulty in identifying what constitutes teacher leadership. The same uncertainty applies to a second point which views leadership as collective rather than individual work. This means it gets harder to see who is engaged in leadership work when there are multiple players who cannot be identified according to named positions for their contributions. Similarly, if it is work (moral purpose) to improve students’ learning and understanding that underpins leadership activity, then this also applies to teachers who have a continuous improvement mindset which sustains their interest and commitment to their actions as teachers. Likewise, if teacher leadership occurs through collegial conversations about students’ learning, it can occur anywhere. This learning conversation flexibility is another factor that contributes to a lack of clarity. That such conversations may be intentional and deliberate or chance opportunities also adds to the uncertainty of being able to identify teacher leadership when it occurs. The matter of opportunity for leadership work is a further difficulty because, even when opportunities are distributed, the distribution occurs because others permit it. Leadership efforts that are generated by teachers without such permission tend to go unnoticed and even the teachers themselves do not seem to recognise their efforts as leadership work. That many teachers do not see this type of influence as leadership and others only recognise leadership from the vantage point of a formal position, suggests there is still work to do to ensure conceptions of leadership encompass formal and informal work.

In my search for clarity regarding the term ‘teacher leadership’, my analysis and research preferences have led me to a view that teacher leadership is not about the separation of leadership work from teaching or of talented teachers having to choose between classroom teaching and moving away from it to become a leader; rather, I favour an alternative which opens opportunities for teachers to confer, support, and share their expertise close to their work in classrooms. This type of leadership is centred on classroom teaching. It is why I am attracted to Frost’s (2014) view in the United Kingdom that teacher leadership is a collective pursuit because the views, experiences, and insights of colleagues deepen understandings in ways that would not be possible if a teacher continued to draw on his or her own individual knowledge and insights.

The closeness of the connection between learning and leadership is a key feature of Frost's (2014) work. Leadership emanates from the need to continue learning and seeing colleagues as a source of influence. Frost claims leadership is an expression of teacher professionalism and therefore is a natural part of being a teacher and being connected to others in the profession. Like me, Frost concentrates on the potential of viewing leadership as collective work with multiple players who can draw upon and influence each other's expertise regardless of status.

Hill (2014, p. 74) also explains how teacher leadership can be a dimension of all teachers' professionalism, saying "it recognises the potential of all teachers to exercise leadership as part of their role as a teacher". Her view aligns teachers' desire to make a difference to students and their learning with the recognition that interacting and working alongside colleagues is the way to gain deeper understandings of what works and why. In this way, leadership comes from the curiosity to answer questions of practice seeing colleagues as a source of support for learning, where each contributes to the others' learning and what it means to lead and learn is intertwined.

Frost (2014, p. 3) draws attention to visibility and recognition for leadership work by posing the question, "does the word 'informal' suggest that teachers exercise leadership but without the benefit of the legitimacy or authority that might stem from holding a designated position?" This question warrants more attention. In answering, he suggests that the discussion of how to talk about teacher leadership comes back to "role-taking rather than leadership practice being a dimension of a teacher's professional identity" (Frost, 2014, p. 3). Recognition and legitimacy keep surfacing in debates about teacher leadership and are matters to which I return later in the chapter.

Looking to Australian research, the view that teachers can be leaders is also apparent. Andrews and Crowther (2006) attribute school revitalisation to the work of many contributors including teachers as leaders. School improvement—referred to as revitalisation—they explain, is about collaborative action involving whole school strategies. They, like Frost, refer to professionalism, but do so with a new kind of professionalism expressed as 'parallel leadership' in order to recognise the relationship between teacher leaders and administrator leaders. This is an indication that teacher leaders differ from administrator leaders, those referred to earlier as leaders with named titles, status, and designated positions in the hierarchy.

Three characteristics underpin the Australians' concept of this parallel leadership: mutualism, sense of shared purpose, and allowance for individual expression. The choice of the word 'parallel' preceding leadership, signifies the importance of work needed by both teacher leaders and principals for school revitalisation. This is recognising that leadership is present throughout a school's layers and tiers and is not just the preserve of those with named positions. Andrews' and Crowther's conception of leadership for school improvement once again picks up a collective thread around the moral purpose of schooling, recognising the need for multiple not individual players. The link to professionalism is enabling here because it signifies the work to be done by professionals supporting one another as leaders and learners, points already made by Frost (2014) and Hill (2014).

In Canada, Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) have gone further with the term 'collaborative professionalism'. I suggest this is perhaps an indication that the word 'leadership' may no longer be helpful because of its perennially dominant focus on named positions, status, and the actions of an individual. Moreover, just as leadership was omitted, so, too, is the word 'teacher'. Personally, I am attracted to the notion of 'collaborative professionalism' because it captures the collective intent, and the ongoing learning that I associate with acting as a professional. I

do, however, see a need to acknowledge the professional base of teaching for this kind of leadership work to be recognised in education.

The previous section has established some of the complexity in discussions surrounding the concept of teacher leadership. Despite the presence of contested views, I hold to some key points that I consider offer a concrete basis for a more defensible account of what constitutes teacher leadership. This is why I feel confident to place my mark in the scholarly literature on notions of collective rather than individual work, the connection between leadership and learning, and why I make the distinction between leadership as work to be undertaken versus leadership linked only with the person attributed a formal title, position, or responsibility. It is these three aspects that I consider fundamental to any clarification of the terminology associated with teacher leadership. In recent times, substantial work germane to the clarification I seek has been undertaken in significant reviews, to which I now turn my attention. Again, these reviews are wrestling with some of the uncertainties that are self-evident in the discussion thus far.

Major literature reviews on teacher leadership

Two major literature reviews have been undertaken on the concept of teacher leadership and what it looks like in practice. These reviews have been seminal, referenced by others researching in the field of teacher leadership. The first, undertaken by York-Barr and Duke (2004), tracked 20 years of research on teacher leadership. The outcome of that review indicated the construct of teacher leadership lacked conceptual and operational clarity. A subsequent review by Wenner and Campbell (2017) considered definitions of teacher leadership, the preparation of teacher leaders, their impact, and factors facilitating or inhibiting teacher leaders' work. The findings revealed there was no consensus around what teacher leadership meant. An analysis of the scope of teacher leadership research did, however, highlight several perspectives. These included instructional leadership by principals, coaches, and teachers (Neumerski, 2013), recognition by policy makers and educational organisations of teacher leadership as an important component of school reform, and reports on teacher leadership initiatives and professional standards for teachers with accompanying evaluation instruments assessing interpersonal skills, collaboration, and relationships with staff. Pertinent to the focus of this chapter exploring explanations of teacher leadership and what the term means, are five themes extracted from the depictions of teacher leadership in research findings summarised by Wenner and Campbell (2017, p. 146). These were:

1. Teacher leadership goes beyond classroom walls.
2. Teacher leaders should support professional learning in their schools (lead professional learning communities, lead formal professional development or assist colleagues).
3. Teacher leaders should be involved in policy and/or decision making at some level.
4. The ultimate goal of teacher leadership is improving student learning and success.
5. Teacher leaders working toward improvement and change for the whole school organisation.

What these points have in common is their implicit fidelity to the moral purpose of schooling, specifically the improvement of students' learning. These points are about the work to be done to achieve this purpose, namely the actions of teachers when acting as professionals wanting to do their best. These points are not concerned with a teacher leader in a particular position. Instead, they highlight leadership which is observable in activities to further students' learning and achievement. It is this natural expression of a teacher's professionalism, the growth of

confidence, and professional learning that occurs through the continuous asking of questions about practice by, with, and through others, which I consider captures the essence of the concept of teacher leadership. Moving on from these seminal reviews of teacher leadership, I now turn to focus on the United States to highlight continuing and more recent attempts to gain conceptual agreement of the term ‘teacher leadership’.

Attempts to reconcile conceptual tensions surrounding teacher leadership in the United States

Continuing evidence of debates about what counts as teacher leadership is reported in a special issue of the *International Journal of Teacher Leadership* (9(1), 2018). This issue includes an account of the work done to establish two separate but complementary organisations for teacher leadership researchers. One operates within the auspices of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). This internationally recognised association attracts thousands of participants to their annual conference. The other is a Teacher Leadership Congress which attracts some of the same members.

Research fields are grouped according to Special Interest Group classifications inside broader divisions in AERA. Division K (Teaching and Teacher Education) is the division housing a newly developed section on teacher leadership entitled “Teacher leadership: Leading within and beyond the classroom (teachers as leaders, policy makers, community activists and decision-makers”. The AERA 2017 website description of this new section states:

This section invites investigations of teachers who demonstrate leadership, expert knowledge, and advocacy both from within the classroom and/or school settings, as well as beyond individual or local school contexts. This could include examinations into the definition and conceptualization of teacher leadership, the impact of teacher leadership on practice/curriculum/policy, innovative programs and models that support the identification and development of teacher leaders, case studies of teachers who lead, teacher research, etc.

Work undertaken (2014–18) on the evolution of the Teacher Leadership Congress has been carefully documented by Berg, Carver, and Mangin (2018). Protocols for the Congress demonstrate how the conceptualisation of teacher leadership has been interrogated through a process of facilitated dialogue. Each Congress has a particular theme, examples of which are 2014: “What is teacher leadership?”; 2015: “Connecting and collaborating?”; 2016: “Agreeing to disagree”; 2017: “Examining the state of the literature”; 2018: “Unpacking contextual contrasts and commonalities”. A journal article by Berg and Zoellick (2019) offers a further framework for defining dimensions of teacher leadership, incorporating: source of *legitimacy*; *support* to accomplish the work; objective of teachers’ influence; and *method* of influence.

Although presented separately, these dimensions are interrelated, raising further questions. After briefly describing the dimensions and listing their related questions taken from Berg and Zoellick (2019, pp. 7–13), I offer my responses to add to this field of study and practice.

Legitimacy

There are many perspectives regarding how a teacher is acknowledged as a legitimate person to engage in teacher leadership work.

Question: Can a person self-declare as a teacher leader?

My answer: Yes, but this will depend on the teacher's conception of what leadership work is and on the views of colleagues. If teachers acknowledge the ways they influence others which helps them in their practice, then this is an example of teacher leadership outside a named position. Acknowledgement by others provides the sense of legitimacy that all self-nomination requires.

Question: Can a teacher become a teacher leader by circumstance?

My answer: Yes. This is certainly possible when teachers respond to colleagues' needs for support, modelling, and coaching. They can be approached by colleagues regardless of whether they are recognised and labelled with a designated leadership title or position. They may initiate support themselves.

Question: Is active agency on the part of the teacher required?

My answer: Yes. The teacher will be responding because of a strong sense of commitment to the shared moral purpose of helping students and their learning. Helping other colleagues in their work with students is part of this collective commitment to students' learning at the workplace and in the wider profession.

Question: Can you be a teacher leader and not know it?

My answer: Yes. Teachers may influence colleagues without attributing such behaviours to leadership. They will be conversing about practice because such talk is a natural occurrence. It is what acting professionally means, moving beyond self to connect with others in the pursuit of a shared moral purpose.

Question: Whose endorsement is necessary to be regarded as a teacher leader?

My answer: This will vary depending on circumstances and teacher leaders themselves. Some people have more of a need for acknowledgement than others. Those with strong internal motivation will engage in leadership work regardless of recognition, though by its very nature, recognition underscores self-efficacy.

Berg and Zoellick (2019) have commented, "whatever its source, legitimacy was always a precondition of leadership" (p. 7). Their comment suggests that the impetus to reach out to others is why leadership actions occur. Again, we see the pulse of moral purpose linking individuals' actions in the workplace.

Support

Where supports for teacher leadership work originate has been another matter for discussion. While there has been agreement about the need for support for teacher leadership, no discernible agreement surrounds how it happens in practice. It is noted that support encompasses external and internal sources, as well as being direct and indirect.

Question: What external supports are available and who provides them?

My answer: Some supports need to be available if teachers are to lead in the flow of practice and begin sharing expertise with colleagues. A workplace that prioritises the conditions enabling the continual learning of its staff is deliberate about structuring the physical layout and timetabling to isolate the time for teachers to work together. Support may include explicit coaching around professional learning conversational skills, scheduled release time to observe colleagues, shared planning and assessment time, resources to support curriculum changes, and individual coaching about how to develop learner-to-learner relationships with colleagues.

Question: Can the provision of support legitimise teachers' roles as leaders?

My answer: Support is a visible way of acknowledging the importance of teacher leadership actions. It is a way to deepen expertise and send a message that colleagues can be a source of support for each other. This is a form of public validation recognising that those closest to classrooms can enhance colleagues' learning and improve teaching in the workplace.

Question: Are teacher leaders those who break ranks to address problems of practice without waiting for support or permission?

My answer: Yes. Teacher leaders do not need others to determine whether or not they will support their colleagues. They will be intrinsically motivated to reach out to colleagues because of the reciprocity of learning from each other, giving and receiving insights that enhance one's own and others' practice.

Berg and Zoellick (2019) argue "the source and nature of the support teachers draw upon in their leadership activities" (p. 8) will enhance the study and practices of teacher leadership. In other words, teacher leadership can flourish when workplace conditions are conducive to informal learning opportunities.

Objective

'Moral purpose' has been a consistent term used in the leadership literature to convey the objective or purpose of an educator's work. This is about the work educators (teachers) do to make a difference to students' learning. A matter to be reconciled is: *At what point does teachers' collegial influence become recognised as teacher leadership?* Following on from this question are sub-questions that explore the reasons for those interactions with colleagues.

Question: Does a teacher leader have to be someone in an instructional coach, mentor, or professional learning leader role?

My answer: No, although it is possible for a leadership position holder to cast aside hierarchical status to be one of a collective in the pursuit of improvements in practice. In this sense, the teacher leader is one of the pack, rather than someone with power over or superior knowledge to offer to others.

Question: Can a teacher leader be someone who has an impact on the cultural conditions of the workplace? For example, promoting a culture of trust and respect, reflective practice, collaborative ways of working.

My answer: Yes. A teacher leader can be modelling how to ensure the workplace is able to fulfil its moral purpose. This is consistent with the notion that the shared moral purpose is the pulse for the workplace, namely the actions needed to support students and their learning through the supports teachers give one another. Mutuality is a key concern for teacher leaders who show respect for their colleagues as co-learners. Furthermore, because teacher leaders are also searching for answers to the puzzles of practice, they are learners as well as leaders and others see them as approachable and credible.

Question: Can a teacher leader be someone who attends to the structural conditions that help teaching and learning? For example, decisions about curriculum, staffing, and timetabling.

My answer: Yes, teacher leaders have useful insights to offer decision making about organisational matters which will improve student and teacher outcomes. This could well mean that they can contribute suggestions to improve structural conditions that keep the continual improvement mindset to the fore as needs are identified, and opportunities and strategies considered.

Question: Can a teacher leader be someone who has a policy or advocacy role?

My answer: Yes, a teacher leader will act according to the strength of their moral purpose. It is this that drives their work.

What is noticeable from these sub-questions is that there is a wide array of possible activities, all making a contribution to the lives and life chances of students through learning.

Method of influence

How teachers influence colleagues is closely tied with methods that may be direct and/or indirect. Questions that help to realise the intent of this influence include:

Question: What counts as direct and intentional influence?

My answer: Teacher leaders who are responsive to context will recognise opportunities where they can usefully share their influence in pursuit of organisational and collegial learning. They will do this because they have a genuine desire to support their colleagues. They will be learning themselves as they work out how to help others.

Question: What counts as indirect and intentional influence?

My answer: Teacher leaders can lead through the efforts of other people too. An example is when groups of teachers secure the services of other agencies to help them work with student projects. Here the actual work is undertaken by the other agencies but is possible through the intentional influence of the teacher leaders who instigate the request for additional support.

Question: Is modelling reflective practice and collaboration teacher leadership?

My answer: Yes, because this is demonstrating a learning intent in order to help others see how to ask questions of their practice. The modelling is intended to demonstrate the process of sense making which an individual could later emulate on their own. The benefits of working with colleagues are realised as ways to improve practice and are how teacher leaders influence colleagues.

Question: How high up the hierarchy can a teacher go and still be a teacher leader?

My answer: This is an interesting question because, in my mind, teacher leadership operates more often than not beyond hierarchy and sometimes despite it. It is not about 'power over' as a position in a hierarchy suggests. Instead, it emphasises 'power with' and learner-to-learner relationships where superiority and status are not important. It operates within a flat structure rather than being leadership progressing up increasingly senior rungs/positions on an organisational ladder. Talking about hierarchy, however, necessitates recognition of positional leadership and notions of status. In teacher leadership, such matters are not the reason for or validation of leadership. Peer-to-peer interactions and transactions are valued because it is these that sustain and motivate teachers to continue their work serving students as learners. This is collective work rather than action concerned with individual status.

Berg and Zoellick (2019) suggest it is helpful to specify how influence is played out because this helps us to understand what teacher leadership is. Together, the four dimensions discussed above help us to understand what teacher leadership looks like in different workplace contexts allowing comparisons to be made. Berg and Zoellick (2019) argue that these dimensions may be a way to reduce the ambiguity and “enable research on teacher leadership to accumulate in productive ways and lead to much-needed theory building in this field” (p. 13). I now draw my reading of teacher leadership research and scholarly literature to a close revealing my current thinking about how to talk about and define teacher leadership.

Conclusion

In my own work, I have defined teacher leadership as interconnected activity recognising that it is embedded in collaborative learning cultures (Lovett, 2018). Like others (Collinson, 2012), I continue to recognise the impetus for teacher leadership work as being the activity teachers engage in to improve student learning and achievement, the primary purpose or objective of schooling (Berg & Zoellick, 2019). This is about accepting a learning orientation to leading and teaching, which I fully acknowledge blurs the two terms. I resist mention of roles in my definition because I consider this favours leadership from a formal positional base marginalising other ways of leading in the flow of practice and as professional interaction. I treat leadership as collective rather than individual work. I believe this acknowledges that expertise is generated from multiple sources and can be shared if workplaces operate on principles of trust, respect, inclusion, and support. I view the spaces available for leadership as being possible through the personal agency of teachers themselves (Frost, 2006) and others who legitimate their expertise and support their efforts by paying attention to how workplaces can be conducive learning environments. I also note how teacher leaders draw upon research findings in their work with other teachers to make meaning from practice and encourage teachers to do the same. Their proactive learning stance is an expression of professionalism and illustrates how learning is generated from leadership work requiring a new skill set to work with colleagues attending to processes, relationships, and feelings associated with reflection, dialogue, and the gathering of evidence to feed into future actions.

I have wrestled with the words ‘teacher’ and ‘leadership’ in the combination term ‘teacher leadership’. I have acknowledged and adopted an alternative conception of leadership as work or activity rather than as position. However, when the word ‘teacher’ precedes leadership, I still feel this tends to privilege position over activity, reinforcing a taken-for-granted orthodoxy. I have considered alternatives to naming teachers as leaders with terms emphasising professionalism and professionalism. While these capture the same learning orientation, they do not make the notion of leadership as activity visible enough for my liking. This is why I have stalled on moving away from the term ‘teacher leadership’ altogether. I have seen the need to acknowledge leadership and its connection to and for learning as the essential work focus and at the same time recognise the actors, the teachers who lead, with the words ‘teacher leaders’. The term ‘teacher leadership’ is therefore my preference at the moment, albeit a term that is still, more often than not, overshadowed by the acceptance of leadership as coincidental with specific positions and roles.

Recommended reading

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