

INFORMAL TEACHER LEADERSHIP: HOW AND WHY CLASSROOM
TEACHERS ENGAGE IN LEADERSHIP

BY

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Abstract

Ongoing interest in teachers as a source of leadership has led scholars and practitioners to seek definitional clarity around the term “teacher leadership” and to better understand both the teacher leader and the work the teacher leader does. This qualitative study investigated the experiences of informal teacher leaders in an effort to contribute to the body of research concerned with how teacher leadership is enacted and cultivated. For this study, informal teacher leaders were defined as full-time classroom teachers who also take on leadership work without formal leadership titles to designate those roles. Research questions were as follows: 1) How do informal teacher leaders define and conceptualize teacher leadership? 2) Why do informal teacher leaders engage in leadership? 3) How do informal teacher leaders perceive the impact of their work? 4) What factors influence informal teacher leaders’ leadership work? Data collection consisted of semi-structured phone interviews with 10 participants who self-identified as teacher leaders. Findings from this study provide important insights into key components of informal teacher leadership. First, informal teacher leaders go above and beyond their job description to engage in professional learning, collaboration, and advocacy. These three dimensions combine to operationalize a definition of informal teacher leadership. Second, informal teacher leaders understand their work as being accessible to all and focused on collective capacity building. These beliefs stand in contrast to conceptualizations that focus primarily on the role and characteristics of an individual as a source of teacher leadership. Third, informal teacher leaders are motivated by their deep commitment to learning, community, and the profession, which compel them to action despite disincentives. Fourth, informal teacher leaders perceive their impact to be most clearly evidenced in the changed attitudes and behaviors of their colleagues. Fifth, informal teacher leaders report their work is most directly impacted by the following

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conditions: their status as classroom teachers, relationships with colleagues, principal or administrative influence, and time constraints.

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Dedication

To Mike, my partner in all things.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is marked by rapid change and unique challenges. Widespread internet access brings an information age unprecedented in scope and a connectivity that requires global citizenry. The threats and trials of this century loom equally large, posing environmental and political problems that require entirely new and innovative solutions. It is obvious that education and preparation systems must evolve to meet this new reality. In fact, well over a decade ago, the U.S. Department of Education founded a coalition to address this growing need to better prepare our nation's students for their modern world. This coalition developed a Framework for 21st Century Learning that has since been adopted by 20 states and widely used to infuse 21st Century Skills into school curricula.

But the same alarm bells that spurred the 21st century skills initiative have ushered in a high-stakes accountability era that threatens innovation in the teaching profession. The era of No Child Left Behind has excluded teachers from decision-making processes that would both benefit from their expertise and enrich their practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006). Teachers are in a unique position to contribute positively to their school organizations and the profession (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012; Silva et. al., 2000; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004) but this potential is in large part unrealized. Though we have recognized the need to modernize what and how our students are learning, not much has changed in the way that our nation's schools function as organizations. Most are governed by hierarchical leadership structures that leave teachers out of decision-making processes and fail to provide adequate instructional leadership (Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2001). Further, the profession is burdened by outdated norms that act as obstacles to realizing the positive leadership potential of teachers. Too often, teachers work in isolation, without the opportunity for or expectation of collaboration. Career paths are

flat, and egalitarian norms stigmatize teachers who distinguish themselves as leaders and disrupt their peer status (see for example Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012; Lieberman & Friedrich, 2007; Mangin, 2005; Stoelinga, 2008).

If we want to meet the needs of our 21st century learners, we must challenge these outdated norms to realize the leadership potential of teachers. Empowering teachers as school leaders not only capitalizes on the unique knowledge and expertise they bring to bear but also holds the promise of increasing job satisfaction (Ingersoll, 2001), fostering meaningful professional development, and improving teaching and learning (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012, Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2011, Wenner & Campbell, 2017, York-Barr & Duke, 2004). It is time for what Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, and Hann (2002) call a “new paradigm” of the teaching profession, “one that recognizes both the capacity of the profession to provide deeply needed school revitalization and the striking potential of teachers to provide new forms of leadership in schools and communities” (p. 52).

In recognition and support of teachers’ leadership potential, government agencies, professional groups, universities and private organizations are exploring the role of the teacher leader. This designation is complex, requiring a deep and careful examination of what it is that teacher leaders do, whether all teachers can or should be leaders, how we select teacher leaders, how we prepare and evaluate teacher leaders, how the teacher leader works with other school and district leaders, and more. As various stakeholders wrestle with these foundational questions, programs and initiatives focused on identifying and preparing teacher leaders have become more and more common. In 2018, Berg, Horn, Supovitz and Margolis conducted the most comprehensive inventory to date of teacher leadership programs and initiatives in the United States. The authors included 285 programs in their inventory, demonstrating both the

proliferation of such programs and the variety in type and approach of individual programs. Across these 285 programs, the authors identified three forms of programmatic support: those that prepare, recognize, and position. Considering each form of support and then the intersection between these three forms, the authors present seven types of teacher leadership programs. The authors hypothesize that programs that intentionally prepare, recognize, and position teachers as leaders (Type G: professional advancement programs) can have the greatest impact on students' access to educational opportunity (p. 19). Such programs are indeed one potential way to recognize, promote, support and retain exceptional teaching and realize the leadership potential of highly effective teachers. In many ways they are exciting avenues through which to challenge the norms of a stagnant or flat career path for teachers, and potentially increase job satisfaction, addressing the aforementioned need to modernize the profession. But there is still much to learn about teacher leadership and the influence of endorsements or role formalization on the leadership capacity of teachers.

Importantly, Berg et al. note that their inventory does not account for the types of initiatives with roles that teachers took upon themselves. They write,

These roles – which could include activities like volunteering as team leader in a professional learning community, collaborating with colleagues on curriculum and hiring, or managing a grant for a school-wide equity initiative – are mentioned here because these informal activities might be among the most common and most influential forms of teacher leadership. (p. 19)

Indeed, informal teacher leadership develops outside the confines of specific programs, making it difficult to draw conclusions about how and why it develops. The work of informal teacher leaders can be spontaneous, undocumented and unrecognized as teachers respond to needs within

their school community. Due in part to the indeterminate nature of the role, research on informal teacher leadership has largely lacked clear definitions of teacher leadership and strong theoretical frameworks, making it difficult to draw conclusions across the literature (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). For the purposes of this study, I define the informal teacher leader as a K-12 teacher who engages in leadership activities outside of her classroom (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). This stands in contrast to the formal teacher leader, who is a teacher who has forgone all or part of her teaching load to take on a different role. Though these teacher leaders do not need an administrative certificate to fulfill their roles, they have moved into a formal leadership role rather than solely the role of a classroom teacher. These roles hold different titles but include coordinator, facilitator, specialist, helper, trainer, lead teacher, master teacher, mentor and coach (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2011).

This role formalization often makes it easier to identify and observe the actions of these formal teacher leaders. But as Berg et al. (2018) note, the activities of informal teacher leaders might be even more influential. Indeed, teachers themselves recognize informal teacher leadership has a greater impact on teaching and learning than formal leadership (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2014). Though it may be less visible, informal teacher leadership is an essential type of teacher leadership as a force for change. Informal teacher leaders, or teachers who engage in leadership actions beyond the normal scope of their job descriptions, operate in any number of capacities and with any degree of recognition by school communities. These teachers may act as informal leaders when they mentor colleagues, write curricula, lead professional development, investigate problems of practice, and participate in school-wide decision-making.

Some researchers have worked to document and categorize the wide range of leadership activities enacted by teacher leaders. For instance, Fairman and Mackenzie (2012) conceptualize

the varied leadership functions of teacher leaders in their Spheres of Teacher Leadership Action for Learning model (Appendix A). The model describes nine spheres of leadership actions that teachers engage in toward the goal of improved student learning. These actions include individual learning, collaboration, reculturing efforts, and advocacy, and are corroborated by additional research literature. The model is particularly helpful in distinguishing precisely what teacher leadership is, and can help unpack this designation of the informal teacher leader. Because research suggests that teacher leadership has powerful implications for teacher and student learning (York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Wenner & Campbell, 2017) but also that formalized teacher leadership roles are sometimes less influential than informal teacher leadership (Fairman and Mackenzie, 2014; Lieberman & Friedrich, 2007; Mangin, 2005; Stoelinga, 2008), the work of these informal teacher leaders is of particular interest.

Informal teacher leadership develops outside the confines of specific programs, making it difficult to draw conclusions about how and why it develops. This study builds our understanding of teacher leadership by focusing directly on the experiences and perceptions of informal teacher leaders. This study advances our understanding of how and why teachers independently assume informal leadership roles in schools, and how they perceive the value of their work. The study explores the following questions:

- 1) How do informal teacher leaders define and conceptualize teacher leadership?
- 2) Why do informal teacher leaders engage in leadership?
- 3) How do informal teacher leaders perceive the impact of their work?
- 4) What factors influence informal teacher leaders' leadership work?

Attempts to foster teacher leadership, such as teacher leader programs and initiatives by organizations and school districts, would benefit from a clear understanding of why some

teachers see themselves as leaders. Understanding the relationship between teaching and leading will help us to consider whether leadership is something we should expect from all teachers, or only certain teachers interested in leadership work. This question looms large as we consider the future of the profession: preparing teachers, engaging teachers, retaining teachers. Investigating informal teacher leaders' experiences might give us a clearer understanding of how best to invest in this valuable resource.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE AND THEORY

There is a wide body of literature surrounding teacher leadership. York-Barr & Duke's (2004) comprehensive review of the teacher leadership literature from 1980 to 2004 provided both a foundation for my review and a reference list to investigate further. I read these studies and reviewed their reference lists, reading the abstracts of studies whose titles suggested they might be relevant, and then reading the full text of the articles' whose abstracts suggested the same. When I found a particularly pertinent article, I investigated more recent publications by looking at articles that cited that article. For my study, articles were particularly pertinent when they were concerned with leadership that originates from classroom teachers or focused on the leadership actions of teachers. My advisor is a scholar in the field and was able to identify gaps in my review as well as recommend further reading. The process was circuitous and lengthy, and developed over the course of two years. During that time Wenner and Campbell (2017) published an updated review of teacher leadership literature which I read and used to guide further exploration into relevant articles. Around this time I began to notice repetition in references cited by the articles most relevant to my research, and a marked change in my own familiarity with relevant researchers. I continued until some degree of saturation had been reached and I was seeing the same citations on a regular basis, a signal that I had reviewed a wide enough body of research to be able to begin grouping my findings to contextualize my study (Randolph, 2009). After my data collection and while writing my findings and discussion I returned to my literature review to revise relevant sections.

My review of the relevant literature is presented in three sections. In the first section I present and relate various definitions of informal teacher leadership. In defining informal teacher leadership, I pay particular attention to what we know about what informal leaders do and value.

I conclude this section by clarifying my own definition of informal teacher leadership. In the second section I turn to the question of whether formalized roles support or hinder the work of teacher leadership, exploring resistance to formalized teacher leadership within the egalitarian norms of schools. By first unpacking what makes a teacher a leader, and then considering the effect of labeling that person as such, I hope to contextualize my study, which seeks to better understand the actions, motivations, and identities of informal teacher leaders.

I conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of identity and communities of practice as defined by Etienne Wenger (1998). I suggest that these themes provide a useful theoretical frame through which to interpret my findings, and that the interplay of identity, learning, and community are particularly important when considering the experiences of informal teacher leaders who exist at the boundaries of “leader” and “teacher” identities.

Defining Informal Teacher Leadership

Though it is fairly intuitive to recognize that leadership may originate from teachers, identifying and defining what informal teacher leadership *is* proves complicated. In 2004, York-Barr and Duke conducted a comprehensive review of over two decades of teacher leadership literature, including 41 studies from peer-reviewed journals, in an effort to understand what is known about teacher leadership. The authors found that very few studies provided any definition for teacher leadership, and very few were grounded in theory. These findings still held true over a decade later, in Wenner and Campbell’s (2017) update on the teacher leadership literature from 2004-2013. This lack of definitional clarity makes it difficult to draw comparisons across the wide body of work, especially when teacher leaders might be defined so differently. The umbrella term might refer to leaders with formalized roles such as coach, hybrid positions that include both teaching and leading responsibilities (see Margolis, 2012), and full-time classroom

teachers who exhibit any number of leadership characteristics and activities. Much of the research on teacher leaders attends to teachers who have adopted some formalized role (see for example: Hart, 1994; Lord, Cress, & Miller, 2008; Margolis, 2012; Firestone & Manno, 2008; Smylie & Brownlee-Conyers, 1992; Taylor, 2008). Teachers in these cases adopt partial classroom schedules or move out of the classroom completely, and they have leadership titles designating a formal role that has been conferred upon them by the school or district administration.

Then there are the teacher leaders without formal roles or titles, or what I refer to as informal teacher leaders. In their recent review of the teacher leadership literature, Wenner & Campbell (2017) limited their review by defining teacher leaders as “teachers who maintain K-12 classroom-based teaching responsibilities, while also taking on leadership responsibilities outside of the classroom” (p. 140). This definition does not fully exclude formal leadership roles, and in fact the researchers note that their definition is most consistent with Margolis’s (2012) definition of a hybrid teacher leader or, “a teacher whose official schedule includes both teaching K-12 students and leading teachers in some capacity” (p.292). Even still, limiting the definition of teacher leader to teachers who maintain K-12 teaching responsibilities does help to draw more precise lines across the literature. Wenner and Campbell argue that this classroom teacher distinction is important because classroom teachers are uniquely positioned in their peer status to both understand the complexities of teaching and influence their colleagues, a stance held by other scholars as well (See for example: Curtis, 2013; Donaldson, 2007; Mangin & Stoelinga, 2008, Muijs & Harris, 2006). In their review, Wenner and Campbell found that relatively few authors explicitly stated their definition of teacher leadership, a finding consistent with that of

York-Barr and Duke's over a decade earlier. Of 54 pieces of literature reviewed, only 19 (35%) explicitly defined what they understood teacher leadership to be.

So what definitions do we have? York-Barr and Duke (2004) offered a definition that has been widely cited, and was used to inform the Teacher Leader Model Standards (2008), one of three skills frameworks used to guide the 285 programs inventoried by Berg et al. (2018). York-Barr and Duke write,

We suggest that teacher leadership is 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. Such leadership work involves three intentional development foci: individual development, collaboration or team development, and organizational development. (p. 288)

This conception views leadership as a process of influence toward student learning, and begins to operationalize that process by identifying development foci.

The influence over team and organizational development is consistent with findings from Silva, Gimbert, and Nolan (2000) who suggest that this kind of meaningful participation of teachers in school decision-making defines a "third wave" of teacher leadership. In contextualizing their comparative case study of three teacher leaders in one school district, the authors distinguish this latest conception of teacher leadership from previous "waves." The authors propose that in the first wave, teacher leadership roles were created to improve the efficiency of the system. Defined by limited instructional leadership, these roles included department head, lead teacher, and union representative. The second wave sought to capitalize on teacher instructional knowledge by widening the scope of teacher leadership roles to include

pedagogical leadership. But too often, these roles were structured as so external to the daily work of teachers that these teacher leaders in roles such as curriculum developer and staff developer were simply creating prepackaged instructional materials for teachers to implement.

Silva et al. (2000) suggest that this gave rise to a third wave of teacher leadership, in which teachers might meaningfully participate in school-level decision making, collaborate with other teachers, investigate problems of practice, and develop initiatives for positive change. This third wave requires what Fullan (1995) identified as a reculturing of schools and a more participatory leadership model. The three teacher leaders in this exploratory case study illuminate some of the key activities of teacher leaders. The primary data source was teacher interviews, and much of the findings are presented in the teachers' own words. Ultimately, the researchers assert that teacher leaders: 1) navigate the structures of schools, 2) nurture relationships, 3) encourage professional growth, 4) help others with change, and 5) challenge the status quo by raising children's voices.

The research in the years since has reinforced these descriptions of the teacher leader. In a larger-scale study, Fairman and Mackenzie (2014) interviewed 40 teachers in seven schools to understand how teachers influence their colleagues and understand their work and their development as leaders. Teachers were selected who were involved with leadership activities in their schools, namely participation in school-designated leadership teams, and in innovative instructional and grouping practices driven by school-wide initiative. Researchers found that teacher leaders worked to increase student learning through a variety of leadership activities, including modeling professional attitudes, coaching colleagues in their use of new materials, collaborating in planning and co-creating of instructional materials, and advocating for change in practices. Many teacher leaders organized small groups to deepen relationships, and all viewed

relationship-building as a key function of leading. They worked diligently to cultivate collegial environments, understanding that these relationships served as the foundation for modeling and coaching activities.

In addition to the prioritization of relationships, attention to student learning is a theme that runs through the teacher leadership literature. Student learning is a major motivator for teacher leadership work (Crowther & Olsen, 1997; Fairman & Mackenzie, 2014; Silva et al., 2000; Wenner & Campbell, 2017) and teacher leaders themselves often insist that their primary objective is to teach (Crowther & Olsen, 1997). This primary focus on students is echoed in Silva et al.'s (2000) fifth assertion of teacher leadership practice, that teacher leaders raise children's voices. Teacher leaders consistently cited a responsibility to children and a goal of improving student learning outcomes as their motivation to lead and initiate change (Silva et al., 2000). In many ways, this may explain what keeps these teacher leaders in the classroom rather than pursuing formal leadership roles, even though they are often stymied by organizational roadblocks, including challenges of navigating organizational structures, uncooperative relationships with school principals, and school cultures that value hierarchical leadership models rather than democratic (Fullan, 2001; Silva et al., 2000). As Donaldson (2007) puts it, "Teacher leadership, to be sustainable for the leader, needs to stay close to students, teaching, and learning" (p. 134).

These definitions and descriptions work to clarify the work of informal teacher leaders. But it's clear that untangling the act of leading from the act of teaching is a messy business. Are all teachers who collaborate within their contexts toward the goal of student learning necessarily leaders? Must all teachers be leaders? Leadership is surely concerned with influence: on student learning, on colleagues, on the school community. Crowther & Olsen (1997) propose a

framework defining teacher leadership as an ethical stance that “manifests in actions that involve the wider community and leads to the creation of new forms of understanding that will enhance the quality of life of the community in the long term” (p. 8). But even if leadership inherently involves influence, just how direct an impact does a teacher’s influence need to be to constitute leadership? Does good teaching count as leadership? What about organizing and facilitating a professional learning community? When considering the wide scope of teacher work, one can see how difficult it is to distinguish a teacher leader from a teacher. And yet, if we wish to cultivate and support teacher leadership, these are questions worth asking.

Fairman and Mackenzie (2012) offer a descriptive model that helps address these questions by effectively representing various spheres of teacher leadership action. They explain that spheres are fitting because they represent the “non-linear, non-continuous activity of teacher leaders” (p. 232). The model includes more obvious leadership actions such as collaboration with community members and school-wide improvement efforts, but also represents less obvious teacher actions that nevertheless function as teacher leadership. Two of the spheres describe actions that are limited in scope to the teacher (engaging in learning about his or her practice) and his or her individual classroom (experimenting and reflecting) but fit naturally into a larger picture of how teacher leadership begins and evolves: necessarily founded in the teacher’s own practice. This attention to the somewhat smaller and less visible work of teacher leaders is an important step in grasping the full picture of informal teacher leadership and what it means for a teacher to be a leader. Donaldson (2007) suggests that the teacher leader, impatient with slow-moving and formal administrative leadership turns instead to the on-the-ground changes that he can make with his colleagues and in his own classroom. Measuring the influence of these actions

may be difficult, but an understanding of leadership at the organizational level would be incomplete without a consideration of this informal teacher leadership.

In the interest of definitional clarity, I offer my own interpretation of informal teacher leadership informed by the definitions presented above. This proposed study views informal teacher leadership as 1) enacted by classroom teachers, 2) encompassing a wide range of activities, which hold a potential for influence, and 3) directed toward a goal of improved student learning. Figure 1 represents this definition of informal teacher leadership as a process begun by the teacher leader and intended to improve student learning.



Figure 1. Informal Teacher Leadership

To account for, incorporate, and encourage informal teacher leadership it might seem productive to formalize the roles of teacher leaders, designating them as coaches or lead teachers. This formalization would allow us to explicitly state desired actions and interactions, monitor, and measure that work. Formal roles might also fit more easily into established leadership structures in schools, allowing us to explicitly incorporate “teacher leadership” without much structural or organizational adaptation. And yet, there is evidence to suggest leadership that originates from informal roles may be more influential on teacher practice and student learning. In many cases, the teacher leader’s informal capacity grants her a unique ability to lead her peers. Attempts to formalize teacher leadership can work counterproductively.

Drawbacks to Role Formalization

The egalitarian norms of the teaching profession can create a hostile environment for teachers who assume formal leadership roles (Barth, 2001; Donaldson et. al., 2008). Teachers often perceive teacher leaders to be challenging norms of seniority or peer status, resulting in diminished centrality and trust (Lieberman & Friedrich, 2007; Mangin, 2005; Stoelinga, 2008). Roles such as department leaders or leadership roles appointed by the principal can be viewed as less legitimate and not recognized by colleagues as sources of true authority (see Fairman and Mackenzie, 2014). As a result, formal teacher leaders are faced with either negotiating the often-competing practices of leading and of maintaining a peer status, or of losing their leadership influence. Mangin's (2005) qualitative study investigated twelve math teacher leaders from five school districts as they balanced their relationships with colleagues and their leadership activities. Through analysis of observation and interview data the author found that teachers routinely deemphasized their expertise in an effort to maintain trusting relationships with their colleagues. They were less likely to give hard feedback in the form of honest critique when observing classrooms, and instead offered non-intrusive supports and resources. These actions were in an effort to maintain a peer status, even though leadership in these cases was formalized. This speaks to the incredibly powerful and potentially harmful norms of egalitarianism in the profession. Expertise is one key component of effective teacher leaders (Firestone & Manno, 2008) and if teacher leaders must sacrifice this expertise in order to build trust with colleagues, essential leadership capital is lost. And yet, the cost of forgoing a peer status seems to so greatly undermine the work of teacher leaders that they deemphasize their expertise.

Losing that peer status can render a teacher leader unable to lead. Stoelinga's (2008) comparative case study of three literacy coordinators found in one case a strong resistance from

teachers to engage with a literacy coach when they perceived this coach to have broken norms of seniority. Teachers in this study turned not to the literacy coach for support, but instead to two teachers who led informally. These teacher leaders maintained a peer status that teachers valued, and in their informal roles carried significant and influential power. School culture played a significant role in establishing the influence of these informal leaders and the lack of influence of the literacy coach, and perhaps contributed to the strong ethos of the teachers. In the end, appointing this teacher to a formal leadership role rendered her ineffectual.

This same conflict between teacher leadership and the egalitarian nature of teaching is evidenced in Lieberman and Friedrich's (2007) qualitative study of teachers' experiences leading among their peers. Researchers selected thirty-one participants of the National Writing Project's summer institute, all of whom were teachers with leadership responsibilities in their schools. Teachers reported through written vignettes the professional risks of distinguishing themselves from their colleagues. They noted that formalized leadership roles interfered with collegiality and were less effective. One teacher reported that when working in a formalized role as a literacy coach, teachers were suspicious and wary of her intentions. When she returned to teaching, she was perceived as a "real" teacher, and thus trusted and more willingly accepted as a source of leadership and ideas. Participants recognized their largely informal leadership positions as helpful toward leading their colleagues.

Donaldson et.al. (2008) identify professional norms of egalitarianism, seniority, and autonomy as major roadblocks to the success of formal teacher leaders. In a qualitative interview study with second-stage teachers (3-10 years of experience) who had assumed formal leadership roles, researchers found that efforts to change teacher practice were met with largely insurmountable resistance from colleagues. Teacher leaders who played a support role for their

colleagues rather than seeking reform were more easily accepted, echoing Mangin's (2005) findings regarding the need for teacher leaders to downplay their expertise and give less meaningful feedback in order to maintain a peer status.

These findings suggest that there are distinct advantages to supporting the informal leadership of K-12 teachers rather than rushing to formalize their roles. A teacher need not be a coach, specialist, or department chair to lead, in fact, the title can get in the way. Informal teacher leaders recognize that a great deal of their power comes from their peer status. At the same time, they feel frustrated by the hierarchical leadership models that dominate schools and impede their abilities to lead and initiate positive change. The field would benefit from additional studies that investigate how informal teacher leaders negotiate this complicated territory, and how they lead within the organizational contexts of their schools.

Conclusion

Teacher leadership offers not only an avenue through which to revitalize the profession, but also a potentially tremendous source of instructional leadership for schools. But adding formalized teacher leader roles without a strong working understanding of the actions, beliefs, and motivations of existing informal teacher leaders could result in the neglect of important facets of the complex work of teacher leadership. There is limited research dedicated to investigating the perspectives of informal teacher leaders and their experiences functioning within existing leadership structures. While we know that their informal capacity grants them an authority among their peers that teachers in formal leadership roles struggle to attain, we don't know much about why they engage in leadership or how they perceive the value of their work. A promising place to begin is with additional study of how informal teacher leaders themselves

conceptualize their role. Here we might discover untapped potential for positive change and promising models for increasing authentic and effective teacher leadership.

Theoretical Framework

In *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (1998), Etienne Wenger presents a social learning theory of how people negotiate meaning within communities of practice. Wenger proposes that competent membership in a community of practice includes mutuality of engagement, accountability to the joint enterprise, and the ability to use the shared repertoire of the practice. Within communities of practice, members combine reification (the creation of artifacts such as words, tools, and documents) and participation (direct engagement in social activities) to make meaning. Through this frame, the informal teacher leader who works toward change does so within and across communities of practice and through the negotiation of meaning.

Informal teacher leaders may navigate the space between teacher communities and administrative communities. They may also be members of professional or academic communities of practice, such as an online professional learning community, a professional organization (such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics), or a cohort working toward a degree or certificate. Figure 2 illustrates a possible nexus of “multimembership” that an informal teacher leader might occupy.



Figure 2. Possible Informal Teacher Leader Nexus of Multi-membership

Wenger would assert that the teacher leader’s participation in multiple communities of practice presents the opportunity for the teacher leader to broker boundary encounters that influence the communities. In discussing the evolution of practice, Wenger explains that if a member has an experience that falls outside of the current regime of competence of a community to which they belong, that member might work to change the community of practice itself to incorporate that new experience. Wenger writes, “If they have enough legitimacy as members to be successful, they will have changed the regime of competence—and created new knowledge in the process” (p. 139). If the informal teacher leader spans the boundaries of multiple communities of practice, that person may facilitate interactions that both advance the joint enterprises of those communities *and* redefine the nature of participation and engagement in those communities. The teacher leader may act as a broker, creating boundary encounters and sharing boundary objects across communities. This work is not without conflict, but it is often individuals who cross or span boundaries who enact change within the communities. Wenger writes, “Brokers are able to make new connections across communities of practice, enable coordination, and—if they are good brokers—open new possibilities for meaning” (p.109).

This brokering work influences the teacher leader's identity. Wenger sees social interaction as the context for identity formation. By constructing our identities through our participation and non-participation in communities, we likewise determine our place in the world, what we care about, what we investigate, who we connect with, what we devote energy to and what we seek or pursue. Wenger emphasizes that because we all belong to many communities of practice, identity entails an experience of multimembership and the work of reconciling these memberships to maintain one identity. Thus that reconciliation is intrinsic to identity. Learning is likewise so closely connected to one's identity because as we learn we are reshaping our identities in light of our new understandings, and our identities are informing what and how we learn, in an ongoing and cyclical process. Wenger argues, "...multimembership is a critical source of learning because it forces an alignment of perspectives in the negotiation of an engaged identity" (p. 218). As explained above, multimembership is also an opportunity, because it has the potential of creating continuity across communities of practice. This work is sometimes desirable and engaging for particular people, who Wenger notes seem to "thrive on being brokers" (p.109). Wenger explains that "Some trajectories find their value in spanning boundaries and linking communities of practice" (p. 154), though he goes on to say that sustaining an identity across boundaries is one of the most "delicate challenges of this kind of brokering work" (p. 154). The danger in this navigation is that it can result in marginality within both communities.

Spanning boundaries is inherent to the role of the informal teacher leader. Wenger's theories of communities of practice and identity formation provide a useful lens through which to consider the experiences of teacher leaders. Absent a formal role designation (coach, department chair, lead teacher), the distinction between teacher and leader is perhaps at least partially a

distinction of identity and one's role within a community of practice. A teacher who begins, for any number of reasons, to imagine herself a leader and participate in a new practice, is undergoing a change in identity that both influences and is influenced by her role in her multiple communities of practice. Wenger argues that for this imagination and excursion into a somewhat different identity to be fruitful, a person must have a community of practice within which to apply that transformation and bring it back in a form of engagement within the community (p. 217). Through this action of distancing and engaging, identity is renegotiated and engagement in practice becomes more reflective. Notions of brokering, multimembership, and the social construction of identity have the potential to illuminate how the social interactions that informal teacher leaders have within and across communities contribute to their identity as leaders.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

For this study I used a qualitative design to gain a holistic understanding of the lived experiences of informal teacher leaders. My study fits within an interpretivist research perspective because I understand that there are many possible subjective realities for teacher leaders' experiences and views of teacher leadership. Qualitative methods and interviewing specifically allowed me to delve more deeply into questions that asked participants to describe their thinking and experiences, and allowed me to follow up to make sure I understood their views.

My unit of analysis was each individual teacher. I acted as a key instrument, gathering data through interviewing participants (Creswell, 2013). I prioritized participant meaning in my data collection: interested primarily not in my own meaning of informal teacher leadership but instead in the ways that individual teacher leaders define, enact, and perceive their own roles. Nevertheless, I attended to my own positionality in my research and practiced reflexivity in both data collection and analysis, with explicit acknowledgement of my own background and beliefs related to informal teacher leadership.

Design

In spring 2016 I conducted a small pilot study that helped inform my methodology for this study. For that study I used purposeful, criterion sampling, relying on self-report from teachers who identified as leaders in their schools (Creswell, 2013). After recruiting participants through Facebook and Twitter posts, I used snowball sampling by asking those participants if they knew any classroom teachers who self-identify as leaders (Merriam, 2009). My sample size was four teachers. I conducted and recorded individual, digital phone interviews using Google Voice, and used both deductive and inductive coding to analyze the data (Hayes & Singh, 2012;

Merriam, 2009). Findings revealed these teachers' understanding of their leadership practices as intrinsic to, rather than separate from, their teaching practices. They view their leadership activities within their schools and their participation in online communities of practice as essential elements of their professional fulfillment and instructional expertise. They described innovative teaching practices and schoolwide initiatives that they shared with their colleagues toward the goal of increased student learning. They did not hold any roles in the formal leadership structures of their schools, but they did bring their ideas and suggestions to school leaders who were largely receptive to their efforts to sponsor an initiative. These findings echoed earlier research findings that teacher leaders are driven by student learning and supported Silva et al.'s (2001) model of a third wave of teacher leadership in which teachers might meaningfully contribute to school leadership structures in a more participatory model. The success of both the sampling and data collection procedures in this pilot encouraged me to replicate these procedures on a larger scale for this study.

Sample

Just as in my pilot study, purposeful sampling of informal teacher leaders afforded me the best opportunity to gain insights toward my research questions (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). But, identifying informal teacher leaders could prove problematic because these teachers do not hold formal roles, titles, or positions. In contrast, Mangin and Stoelinga's (2008) collection of research on teacher leadership explicitly delineated parameters to characterize instructional leadership roles, identifying the roles as (a) nonsupervisory, (b) focused on instructional improvement, (c) aimed at teachers' capacity building, and (d) working at the school level. But what selection criteria could I set for informal teacher leaders? Silva et al. (2000) identified informal teacher leaders through peer nomination and evidence of engagement

in leadership activities such as serving on committees and writing curriculum. Fairman and Mackenzie (2014) identified teacher leaders as classroom teachers who either served on leadership committees or engaged in innovative practices. Stoelinga (2008) identified informal teacher leaders by using network analysis to examine sources of influence within a school.

In considering my own sampling strategy I drew upon the methodology of these studies along with the definitions of teacher leadership offered by researchers. My sampling criteria included three components: 1. Peer-nomination, 2. Self-identification as a teacher leader, and 3. Participation in at least three spheres of leadership action as defined by Fairman and Mackenzie (2012).

I began by posting on Twitter, asking teachers to name a teacher that they perceive as a leader. The post read: “I want to talk to informal teacher leaders- K-12 classroom teachers who don’t hold formal leadership roles but do lead. (See figure for range of leadership actions.) Please retweet/tag a teacher you consider a leader.” I attached a picture of Fairman and Mackenzie’s (2012) Spheres of Teacher Leadership Action for Learning model (see Appendix A) to clarify leadership actions. My Twitter post was only visible to people who follow me, so I requested that individuals share my call with their own contacts, utilizing snowball sampling techniques (Merriam, 2009). This took the form of retweeting to a broad audience and reaching out directly to specific individuals. I utilized hashtags to reach a larger audience, and reached out to educators through other means, such as email and text messaging, asking them to identify a teacher they perceive as a leader. I actively sought demographic variation within my sample, considering potential participants’ gender, race, age, years of teacher experience, subject and grade-level taught, pursuing a diverse pool. I did this by reaching out to contacts in different subject areas and demographic groups, avoiding calling for participants in the same circles of

contacts. By seeking demographic variation within my sample I hoped to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences and beliefs of informal teacher leaders.

Ultimately, a total of thirty teachers were nominated.

The next stage of my recruitment was to send a direct message to those thirty teachers who had been nominated by their peers. In this message I briefly described my research and explained that they had been identified as a teacher leader. I stated that if they considered themselves teacher leaders, I would love to talk more, and asked that they send me their email addresses. This self-identification was important because of my interest in exploring teachers' own professional identities. Why do some teachers identify as leaders? What motivates them to lead, and are their leadership activities professionally and personally enriching? A better understanding of teacher leaders' perspectives on their own identities as leaders could inform efforts to cultivate teacher leadership. Of these thirty nominees, twenty one responded to my direct message and sent me their email addresses.

Finally, I sent emails to these twenty one teachers. I shared Fairman and Mackenzie's (2012) Spheres of Teacher Leadership Action for Learning model (see Appendix A) and asked potential participants to identify and provide an example of participation in at least three spheres of teacher leadership action. The model describes nine spheres of leadership actions that teachers engage in toward the goal of improved student learning. These actions include individual learning, collaboration, reculturing efforts, and advocacy, and are corroborated by additional research literature. The model is particularly helpful in distinguishing precisely what teacher leadership is, and helped ground my sampling criteria with specific leadership action. Ten teachers responded to my email and sent back a completed form indicating examples of

leadership actions using Fairman and Mackenzie's (2012) model. I called this form Identifying Teacher Leadership Actions Form (see Appendix B).

These ten teachers met all of my sampling criteria and were willing to participate in the study. This number of participants was my estimated minimum number of participants necessary to ensure a reasonable coverage of the phenomenon in question: the experiences and beliefs of informal teacher leaders. Participant demographics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1			
<i>Participant Demographics</i>			
Gender	Location	Grade Level/ Subject Area	Years Teaching
F	Missouri	High School ELA Library Media Specialist (K-5)	20 years
M	New Jersey	High School ELA	10 years
F	New Jersey	First Grade	15 years
M	New Jersey	High School ELA	8 years
F	New Jersey	1st grade Reading Interventionist, grades 4 & 5	10 years
M	New Jersey	High School Science	22 years
M	Tennessee	6th grade	10 years
M	New Jersey	High School Social Studies	9 years
F	New Jersey	2nd grade	4 years
F	New Jersey	5th grade	11 years

Despite sampling for variation, all but two of my participants teach in New Jersey, and only one participant self-identified as a person of color. I did achieve demographic variation in regards to gender, years of teaching experience, and subject and grade-level taught. Although my sample was small and nonrandom, I attempted to capture enough diversity within the sample that I might contribute to a wider understanding of the nature of informal teacher leaders' activities, experiences and perspectives (Merriam, 2009).

Data Collection Procedures

I conducted one formal interview with each participant. Interviews were conducted by phone and lasted between an hour and an hour and a half. I used a semi-structured interview protocol comprised of a series of open-ended questions. These questions are directly linked to my research questions and informed by my pilot study and the literature. Probing questions were included in the protocol and were used as needed. This instrument allowed for the standardized structure needed to cover key areas but also for elaboration of participant responses as appropriate (Patton, 2002).

My interview protocol (See Appendix C) was purposefully designed and sequenced to best understand participants' perceptions of their work as informal teacher leaders. The interview contained experience and behavior questions, and opinion and value questions (Patton, 2002). Sequencing encouraged participants to respond descriptively, beginning with questions that asked participants to describe current behaviors and activities. As I moved through more opinion and value based questions, I posed singular, clear questions that attempted to be as open-ended as possible (Patton, 2002). For the most part, the instrument worked as intended. I found that in some cases I needed to skip a question or reorder my questions to account for the direction that the conversation had taken. Sometimes participants shared their thoughts on a particular topic

before I reached that question. In that case I noted that we had already covered that topic, but asked if there was anything further they wished to add. I also followed fruitful and relevant tangents not accounted for in my interview protocol.

I intended to conduct a second round of interviews to learn about any updates to leadership activities that were described in the first interview. I found that participants by and large shared reflective responses that used examples of their leadership activities to illustrate their beliefs and perceptions around the key ideas I raised. Participants did not readily share stories or narratives that illustrated their experiences, and so there was little opportunity to follow up on a particular action. This is a limitation of my sampling procedures and data collection procedures because a single phone interview did not allow for the observation or relationship building that might have elicited more detailed accounts or examples. Even still, the data I gathered from these interviews adequately supported my research questions and the specific points I was interested in. The conceptual insights that participants shared were useful toward understanding their work, and I decided that a second round of interviews was not necessary to arrive at some key findings related to my research questions. Instead, I reached out to participants through phone and email to ask them to elaborate as needed. I shared preliminary findings with participants and asked for their feedback. Mainly, this took the form of me checking to make sure that my understanding of their responses was accurate, but we sometimes covered new ground in these conversations as participants elaborated on particular points.

I recorded all interviews using digital voice recording software on my cell phone. At the conclusion of each interview, I labeled and dated the audio recording and kept an accompanying document of my insights, questions, and hunches as I reflected on the interview, serving as the first stage of analysis. I also took notes on my interview protocol. Finally, I used transcription

services to obtain a transcript for each interview. I stored all documents digitally in individual participant folders on a password protected computer.

Data Analysis Procedures

As I collected data I worked to maintain careful procedures for data management, to best prepare for analysis. I kept the data organized and labeled according to a stable system that allowed me to access data as needed. This took the form of digital folders organized by participant. Each folder contained all related documents and data for that particular participant, including consent forms, Fairman and Mackenzie's (2012) Spheres of Teacher Leadership Action for Learning model, interview audio transcripts, reflection documents, and my notes on the interview protocol. The decisions I made about what data to collect and how to organize them served as my first stage of data analysis-- data reduction (Hays & Singh, 2012; Miles & Huberman, 1984). My interview questions served as the beginning of the reduction phase of data analysis in this qualitative study: by purposefully limiting the focus to align with my research questions began to narrow the focus of my study and, thus, the analysis (see Appendix D). Data analysis continued during the data collection process. The preferred method of data analysis for qualitative studies includes simultaneous collection and analysis (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009), and to this end I took notes throughout the data collection process to record possible connections, observations, and insights in relation to my research questions as I conducted my interviews. Much of this work was recorded in the reflective writing that I did at the conclusion of each interview. These pieces of writing took the form of preliminary descriptive summary, allowing me to craft initial narratives. I returned to these notes and summarizing narratives throughout my analysis process, using them as a map to understand how my thinking changed over the course of data collection, and an additional source of insight into the data. Hays and

Singh (2012) stress that qualitative data analysis is not a linear process, but instead a cyclical one. My initial reflections and notes on my conversations and interviews began the analysis process and helped me make sense of the raw data collected.

After I had conducted all my interviews and reread my reflective narratives, I used my research questions and the literature to create a spreadsheet with rows organized by participant and columns organized by codes. I began with deductive, etic codes using keywords from my research questions and the literature (Hayes & Singh, 2012; Merriam, 2009) and formed inductive codes as I worked, listening again to audio transcripts, rereading the written transcripts, and following up with participants on key points. My codes are listed in Table 2.

Table 2 <i>Codebook</i>
Defining teacher leadership
Impact
Classroom teacher status
Motivation
Reduce motivation
Self-identification
Leadership Activities
Factors that influence leadership work
Principal influence
School culture
Relationships
Outside learning

Time
Leadership structure
Role definition
Outside forces

I worked to identify themes and patterns and looked at relationships between codes, moving from description to interpretation (Hayes & Singh, 2012; Patton, 2002). I initially tried organizing my data by research question, but eventually transitioned to looking for broad themes or claims across the data and organizing by claim. Each new organization provided additional insights that informed the next (Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Examining the data in varied configurations helped me identify themes and claims (Miles & Huberman, 1984). As I worked through various codes and visual displays, I reviewed the transcripts to ensure consistent coding throughout my data. The cyclical and reciprocal nature of analysis requires that codes, patterns, and assertions be adjusted throughout, but periodic checks of codes for stability and reliability allowed for fairly confident progress toward valid findings (Hayes & Singh, 2012).

Eventually, my analysis moved from identification of specific findings to broader, more conceptual claims about the data and some working hypotheses about the phenomenon of teacher leadership. Hayes and Singh (2012) note that this move from exploratory to confirmatory analysis is known as analytic induction. I thought broadly about the literature and my data, considering what some of the most major takeaways might be. An excerpt from my research journal at this stage reads,

Fairman and Mackenzie (2014) write, “Although standards for teacher leadership call for more recognition of teacher leadership, we might consider how the terms ‘teacher

leadership’ and ‘teacher leader’ hinder progress toward teachers embracing collective responsibility.” Participants were much more comfortable talking about teacher leadership as a collective and essential endeavor than they were talking about themselves or others as individual teacher leaders. Focusing on *leadership* rather than the *leader* fits with what we know about leadership being located in activities rather than roles (Spillane et al., 2004). In fact, participants seemed much more interested in building toward a sense of collective efficacy than they did in further honing or defining their role as a teacher leader.

This move to more conceptual thinking helped me to make claims that eventually became my findings. Claims at this stage included:

1. Teacher leaders are more interested in the opportunity for collective capacity building that teacher leadership represents than they are in claiming or embodying the role or title of “teacher leader.”
2. Teacher leaders are motivated to engage in leadership activities in order to: improve their own practice, connect and collaborate with like-minded individuals, professionalize their jobs.
3. Teacher leaders see their impact in changed attitudes or practices of their colleagues.
4. Teacher leaders do not view their leadership work as a path to administration.
5. Teacher leaders identify their status as classroom teachers as critical to their leadership work.

I mapped my claims to my research questions and also looked back at the table from my proposal that mapped interview questions to research questions. That helped me think about which interview questions I had intended to address which research questions so that I could then

review the data specifically in those responses. I also used Fairman & Mackenzie's (2012) model to draw some conclusions about responses. For instance, when asked if there are any leadership activities that all teachers should engage in, participants spoke about activities that are represented in this model. I then went back to the written form (Appendix B) they had submitted identifying their leadership actions using this model, and found that all spheres of the model were represented in my data. I kept a working document to keep track of my own thoughts on various claims, key quotes from my data, and relevant citations or key ideas from the literature.

When I began to draft my findings I organized them initially by research question before organizing them thematically. I shared multiple drafts of my findings with members of a writing group and my advisor for feedback and critique. My advisor in particular was able to help me see how moving away from my research questions and organizing the findings thematically would help clarify my key takeaways from the study.

Positionality

The positionality of the researcher influences every stage of research design. At the most foundational level, my stance as a constructivist informs how I make meaning from data (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I believe in pluralistic and contextualized perspectives of reality. I did not seek a single, objective truth regarding the nature of teacher leadership, but instead an understanding of teacher leaders' experiences and perspectives. As such, I considered findings valid even if they contradicted each other, but still worked to draw meaning from these findings, arriving at a deeper understanding of the teacher leadership experience not simply on an individual basis, but more broadly.

My role as a former and current self-identified informal teacher leader informed my research questions, my data collection methods, my interpretation of the data, and my choices

around what emerging themes should be pursued. I entered my research with a foundational belief in the power and importance of leadership that comes from teachers. I further understand teaching to be a craft that calls for leadership. I have been personally discouraged by leadership structures in schools that diminish the influence of teachers' voices and fail to utilize their expertise in decision making. I have also seen first-hand the positive influence of actions undertaken by informal teacher leaders in school settings. I am a member of a professional organization that actively studies and cultivates teacher leadership in the English teaching field, and have presented at conferences on my own experiences engaging with leadership activities. These activities include mentoring, building and sustaining collaborative workgroups, curriculum writing, and serving on school committees concerned with developing policy and providing school-wide services to students.

My placement within this community helped my research because I have a first-hand awareness of informal teacher leadership activities and was able to identify important aspects of the practice that others could overlook. In addition, my positionality sometimes helped to forge a connection with participants, or to have an understanding of things they might be alluding to or struggling to find words to express. My position within the community helped me ask probing questions in these cases. However, it is possible that my bias toward attributing value to the role of teacher leader could color my interpretation of the data. I believe that my potential bias in this area was not much of a hindrance to this study because my questions focused on the experiences and perspectives of participants, rather than an attempt to measure their impact. I reflect on my positionality in an effort to examine my own biases, values, and background, and the ways in which these things shape the scope, analysis, and results of my study (Creswell, 2013).

Validity and Reliability

The validity and reliability of the findings are strengthened as a result of several procedures. Maintaining a research journal aided my internal accountability (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In this journal I articulated not only my decision making process and actions throughout the research project but also my own worldview and assumptions whenever they arose, so as best to understand the ways in which these factors might influence my collection methods and interpretations. This journal contained details of my data collection processes, reflections, questions, and decisions, and acted as a running record of my interactions with the data, ensuring reliability. The reflective write-ups I completed after each interview served a similar purpose.

Member checks were another key component of my data analysis as I moved toward interpretation of my data. By asking participants for feedback on my emergent findings during my analysis process, I felt more confident that I was capturing their perspectives accurately (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Merriam, 2009). I called or emailed participants with summaries of my interpretations of the data and with follow-up questions when I needed further clarification regarding their perspectives. In a few cases participants were able to further clarify a point that I had been misinterpreting or add greater detail to help me more fully understand their perspective.

Finally, the rich description and detailed quotes that characterize strong qualitative research help to establish credibility by sharing a full picture of the context and participants with my readers. I sought to provide as much detail and information as possible in my methods and findings, both to substantiate and validate my findings and also so that other researchers may judge the transferability of my findings to other contexts (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Merriam 2009).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Findings from this study provide important insights into key components of informal teacher leadership. First, informal teacher leaders go above and beyond their job description to engage in professional learning, collaboration, and advocacy. These three dimensions combine to operationalize a definition of informal teacher leadership. Second, informal teacher leaders understand their work as being accessible to all and focused on collective capacity building. These beliefs stand in contrast to conceptualizations that focus primarily on the role and characteristics of an individual as a source of teacher leadership. Third, informal teacher leaders are motivated by their deep commitment to learning, community, and the profession, which compel them to action despite disincentives. Fourth, informal teacher leaders perceive their impact to be most clearly evidenced in the changed attitudes and behaviors of their colleagues. Fifth, informal teacher leaders report their work is most directly impacted by the following conditions: their status as classroom teachers, relationships with colleagues, principal or administrative influence, and time constraints. Each of these findings is described in depth in the following sections.

Defining Informal Teacher Leadership

Nearly all participants describe teacher leaders as going above and beyond their job description. In comparison, they described the minimum baseline needed to fulfill one's role as a teacher. Teachers have to show up for work, teach their students the course material, keep the students safe, and fulfill any other contractually mandated obligations such as faculty meetings or duties. Participants described teacher leaders as teachers who consistently "go above and beyond" these basic requirements of their jobs. In doing so, they set an example of professionalism and have a greater influence on their colleagues and their school community.

This willingness to “go above and beyond” is viewed by teacher leaders as evidence of a dedication to the profession and to improving it. In discussing this attitude shared by teacher leaders, participants used the terms “professionalism” and “integrity.” These descriptors seem to be exemplified by teacher leader engagement in three main domains: professional learning, collaboration, and advocacy.

Professional learning. Teacher leaders seek out and facilitate professional learning opportunities. In reflecting on their own practice and that of the teacher leaders they know, all participants identified an active involvement in learning opportunities to be a key piece of what it means to be a teacher leader. In their experiences, professional learning took many forms, including additional schooling or seeking further degrees, active engagement with learning networks and communities, participation in professional organizations, attendance at workshops and conferences, and reading and writing about the profession. Regardless of the avenue for learning, teacher leaders share in common that they are actively seeking learning that will help them improve their practice and positively influence students. One teacher leader explained,

[Teacher leadership is] the work that the teachers are doing to better themselves as learners, to improve instruction and practice of their colleagues, and to improve student learning in classrooms and in a school. But it's really something that I would say comes from the teachers themselves wanting to improve on some aspect of school and instruction.

This teacher’s note that the work “comes from the teachers themselves” is an important distinction and common thread throughout participants’ explanations of teacher leadership. Teacher leaders seek out learning opportunities when they don’t have to, and they have taken

ownership over their own professional growth. This evidences a commitment to the profession that is perceived as “above and beyond” the job requirements.

A dedication to professional learning seems to be both a stance or mindset that participants identify as a shared trait of teacher leaders and an avenue toward impact. In describing a colleague that he thinks of as a teacher leader, one participant explained,

There is another science teacher who... when anybody thinks of this person, they would think ‘professional’ immediately. Like they are *all in* on this profession. She goes to conferences and finds out information about Next Generation Science Standards. Things that a lot of teachers roll their eyes at hearing new requirements and standards and things like that. But she just goes and finds out about that stuff and tries to, you know, look at it in the most positive light. And then she'll come back from conferences and talk to the staff. Like in sort of informal ways. But like, ‘Oh, like my God I just went to this life changing conference. Let me tell you about it.’

This description of a teacher leaders’ dedication to her own learning also evidences another important aspect of leadership practice: sharing the learning with colleagues. They suggest that this learning is an essential piece of leadership as it allows teacher leaders to contribute new knowledge to their communities and improve their practice in a way that ultimately influences students and colleagues. In their conceptual model demonstrating the different ways that teachers demonstrate leadership, Fairman and Mackenzie (2012) distinguish sharing ideas and learning from the action of collaborating and reflecting together on shared work. This distinction is similarly meaningful in my findings. Collaboration, which will be discussed in the next section, involves working together or engaging in a collective effort. Sharing learning, as I describe it

here, is different from this collaboration because it refers specifically to teacher leaders modeling professional learning attitudes and sharing their own professional learning with colleagues.

Most teacher leaders described sharing learning in both formal settings such as after-school workshops and informal settings such as lunchroom conversations. They noted that in many cases the learning they engage in positions them as sources of knowledge or learning for their colleagues. One teacher described his attendance at local and national conferences and engagement in those professional networks and explained that as an unintended consequence, colleagues have started to look to him as a leader. He explained, “The past couple of years I’ve just noticed, maybe as an offshoot or as a result of my getting involved in all these other things, people sort of see me as somebody that they can come to.” Another teacher leader echoed this experience, explaining that her interest in professional learning has positioned her as a source of learning for other teachers. She explained,

It’s always been that way. Mainly because even as a new teacher, I was always looking to partner with other people, maybe even for my own growth; to see what I could do or mimic or capture from them to grow as a professional, as an educator. So I think that naturally made me more open, or people more open to come to me, because I was more open to talk to them as well.

Simply by being visibly dedicated to learning more about their practice, teacher leaders find that colleagues gravitate toward them as sources of knowledge. This seems to be a logical outcome of having knowledge to share, but it also seems to function as an opening or invitation toward a certain mindset or behavior: that of a learner. Teachers are inclined to learn from these teacher leaders because the teacher leaders themselves are learning.

Because classroom teachers teach students during their contracted working hours, much of this professional learning happens “off the clock” which contributes to the perception of it being “above and beyond” and therefore indicative of a leadership stance. However, participants also name their classrooms themselves as sites of learning. As one participant shares, “My work in the classroom is the raw material that allows me to keep learning enough to share with others.” Teacher leaders are reflective about their own teaching practices and view their classrooms as sites for exploration and investigation. It is in their classrooms that they try out new strategies or practices they’ve learned. For instance, one teacher leader described the process of experimenting with not assigning grades. He piloted this approach for a single marking period, with the support of his supervisor and principal. He then wrote about the experience on his blog to share his learning with others, virtually opening the doors of his classroom to allow others to peek inside. Other teacher leaders described opening their classrooms to their colleagues by inviting visitation, even though this practice is counter-normative in many schools. Teacher leaders described this practice as one way that they share their learning and invite others into the learning process. One teacher leader described working with other colleagues to try to normalize this kind of open-door policy. She described,

We've really tried to open up our classrooms so that teachers can come in and see what we're doing and ask questions and we can kind of work through things together. And I want to be really clear that it's not...I'm not opening up my classroom to say that what I'm doing is right and everyone should be doing it. It's more of a way to improve the dialogue in my school about practice and to help people feel more comfortable asking questions and asking for help and recognizing that we don't have to be closed off in our classrooms, that we can kind of step outside and see what's going on and it not being threatening.

Teacher leaders are in a unique position to model professional learning for colleagues because they are still in the classroom. When they seek professional learning and apply it in their classrooms, and then talk about their experiences with colleagues and invite colleagues to participate in the discussion about new strategies they are trying, they potentially elevate the type of “teacher-talk” that takes place in their schools and make opportunities for other teachers to engage in reflection about teaching practices. In this way their learning is not isolated to their own improvement as a teacher, but instead influences others connected to them. For this reason, teacher leaders view professional learning as essential to the practice of leadership.

Collaboration. In the previous section I make a distinction between sharing professional learning with colleagues and collaborating together on joint work. Teacher leaders do both. Little (1990) carefully distinguishes forms of collegial relations to consider their position along a continuum from independence to interdependence. Along this continuum, sharing, in which teachers deprivitize their materials, methods, ideas, and opinions, arrives earlier than joint work, defined by shared responsibility for a task and true interdependence. Beyond sharing their professional learning with colleagues, teacher leaders are also interested in collaboration as joint work, or this collective action that Little identifies.

Teacher leaders are not content to work in isolation, but instead seek community and endeavor to work with other teachers in shared leadership action. When they talked about teacher leadership and attempted to identify or define teacher leaders in their contexts, all teacher leaders spoke about collective action and the power that they find in meeting other like-minded individuals and working together. They conceptualize their teacher leadership work as part of a collaborative effort with other teacher leaders. One teacher leader described the powerful experience of forming a learning community with colleagues in his department and using

discussion protocols to look at student work to inform revisions to modes of assessment. Another teacher leader described how she has recognized and connected with other teacher leaders across different schools within her district. She explained,

I would say in my school and across the district, there are pockets of teachers that essentially share the same kind of beliefs about teaching and learning and a willingness to share what's going on and ask questions and support each other. And so I would say that there's sprinkled in each school...in my district there are four elementary schools, one middle school, one high school, and obviously I'm more familiar with the teachers at the elementary level, but I also know teachers within the Middle School and high school from summer work that I've been engaged in, and so across the district there's kind of a sprinkling of these teacher leaders who I have emailed over the years.

She talks about teacher leaders as being “sprinkled” across schools and existing in “pockets,” a description that supports this general sense that not all teachers are interested in this leadership work, but that teacher leaders are highly motivated to find others who are and connect with like-minded individuals. Most importantly, after identifying these teacher leaders she opened lines of communication with them and invited them to engage in a routine of peer classroom visits to deepen their collective understanding of a particular practice. Likewise, this teacher has also formed a learning community that meets during a shared lunch period. The small group of teachers brainstorms, makes plans to try new things in the classroom, and reflects on outcomes.

This kind of collaborative learning and action around a particular goal was common in participants’ descriptions of their leadership activities. Another participant described an initiative he had taken on the previous year with the express goal of promoting teacher leadership by encouraging colleagues to identify needs and work together on projects that address these needs.

He has organized a Teacher Leader cohort within which teachers meet to share ideas for school and district improvement efforts and then form small groups to pursue these projects. He views their collaborative efforts as a quintessential example of teacher leadership.

Existing along the line between sharing learning and engaging in true collaboration is the work that teacher leaders do to actively encourage colleagues to take on initiatives or leadership action of their own. In these cases, teacher leaders are modeling behaviors or coaching colleagues with the express intention of empowering them to see themselves as leaders and engage in leadership action. There is often a shared endeavor here, but the teacher leader is encouraging, guiding, or coaching. The resulting work might be shared, or it might be a distinct and new project of the individual teacher. This reaching out to colleagues is a common thread throughout teacher leaders' conceptions of what it means to not only be a good teacher but a teacher leader. One teacher leader explained,

A teacher leader would be someone who exercises effective instruction in the classroom as well as has an affinity towards sharing and collaborating with members of their team or faculty members. [A teacher leader] is inspired by not only success in the classroom around classroom culture or classroom management or effective lesson delivery, but is excited about sharing and coaching others to find that same success or to work with them to get there.

This definition includes the sharing and collaborating mentioned by all teacher leaders but also goes on to express a dedicated and intentional effort to move colleagues along a continuum by "sharing and coaching others to find that same success." Even when teacher leaders did not explicitly describe their collaborative efforts in this way, there did appear to be an intentionality around the collaboration that seeks to improve instruction and enact positive

change. Teacher leaders are actively engaged in influencing other teachers through meaningful collaboration. Their actions are meant to inspire similar action in their colleagues. One participant explained, “A teacher leader is someone who inspires other teachers to be professional in their work.” Teacher leaders see this inspiration as coming from setting a certain example, but also from more overt efforts to form community and engage other teachers in leadership activities. They are driven to share learning with their colleagues, and perhaps most significantly, are driven to inspire leadership action in their colleagues. Participants cite examples of encouraging other teachers to take on leadership roles such as presenting at professional conferences or professional development days within their schools. One teacher leader suggested teacher leaders have “a keen awareness of what other people are able to add to the school community [and help] them see that and how it could be put to great use for a common goal.” This “spreading” of leadership rather than keeping it siloed or restrained to one individual is essential to how participants understand teacher leadership.

Advocacy. Teacher leaders work to give teachers a voice and agency. They “speak boldly” to administration, community members, and sometimes policy makers on behalf of teachers. Participants spoke about “moving the profession in a positive direction” and taking initiative to enact positive change. One teacher leader describes his work to form a community of support and learning for teachers in his area as a conscious resistance against a system that he believes is harming the profession. He described observation feedback being tied to evaluations and ultimately a teacher’s pay as “fundamentally wrong” and worries that among other things it breeds competition and fear rather than collaboration. He explained his teacher leadership work as a direct response to this wrongheaded policy. He explained,

I have no time to kind of attack the failures that currently are in place because there are far more well-funded and far more well entrenched. So instead I will build something beautiful right next door, and that's kind of what the idea is. If we can say, 'Wait a second, the ground upon which you built the divisiveness and the difference wasn't real'. In fact we have far more in common than we don't. So we're just going to check the boxes and do the work, but we're going to sit here and share together. We can collaborate together. We're going to be safe saying, 'Hey, I'm not good at this. Can someone help me?'

Though he is not lobbying policy makers directly in this case, this teacher leader is actively fighting against policies he believes are harmful to the profession by cultivating a community that resists some of the negative impacts of those policies and refuses to let those policies define their work.

Another teacher leader did describe actively working to influence change at the legislative level. She defined a teacher leader as, "someone who's not afraid of change... also holds themselves with a sense of integrity and those character traits that we all love. A teacher leader is also someone who's innovative and willing to share ideas, speak boldly to administration and to influence change at the local level and also maybe even laws and legislative action." She described some of her work in this area as particularly necessary because she is speaking to policymakers from a position of experience with teaching students and working in schools. She identified one of her leadership actions as, "meeting with our local representative just to talk about things that affect the schools on a more personal level with students and teachers, those types of things, not being afraid to ask for those meetings with local representatives." She went on to describe serving on committees spearheading initiatives and

participating in groups and events that seek to connect the community members with the school. In each of these cases, she views her role as actively advocating for positive change.

This teacher leader, along with three other participants, happens to hold a title or award that gives her a bit of an extra platform from which to speak and advocate for change. These teachers have been awarded the County Teacher of the Year award or other awards of distinction such as the Milken Educator Award. In some cases these awards and the activities associated with the awards have put the teacher leaders in contact with policy makers and other influential people. Though these awards and distinctions are in no way necessary for a teacher to be a teacher leader, these particular teacher leaders have used the platforms afforded to them by the awards to advocate for the profession.

Teacher leaders think on a macro level about how they might make positive change, and often participate in activities intended to enact that change. Participants consistently use the terms “change-maker” and “influencer” to define the teacher leader. One participant described his effort to “erode a rigid structure” of leadership in the profession and provide a space for teachers to problem-solve and influence decision-making. In some cases this takes the form of bottom-up curricular change. One teacher described creating a new word-study curriculum with a committee but noticing that teachers were struggling with implementation. She created resources to support implementation and provided them to her colleagues as an answer to the problem they were facing with implementation. She explained, “I think that this sounds not as grand as possibly some of the other leadership activities that might be in the research, but I think it is important, especially given the way schools are structured and the kind of emotional vulnerability that goes along with it.” Sharing these resources felt like an act of resistance and vulnerability because the teacher evaluation system had created what she perceived to be a

competitive rather than collaborative culture. In sharing these resources and offering to support colleagues in implementation she was taking steps to make the curricular change happen and influence the culture toward collaboration, advocating for a more cooperative and supportive approach. Other teacher leaders describe bringing back new strategies and curricular elements from outside learning experiences and working to implement them across grade levels or subject areas. One teacher even described advocating for the inclusion of a new course offering. These actions reflect an attention to the learning experiences of all students within the school community, and a willingness to dedicate time and effort to make more systemic change.

As a result, these teacher leaders feel that their colleagues look to them as informal representatives or advocates. One teacher explained that when she and her grade-level team are confused about something, she is the one who speaks on behalf of the group. She described,

So we had a Writer's Workshop session yesterday all day and some of the stuff was a little different. Some things that we've wanted to do and it's not been said that 'Yes, you can do it.' But at this session she was saying we could. So you know, I was the one that raised the hand and asked those questions that other people maybe felt uncomfortable to ask. And I think that is a role when you are a teacher leader, you have built that relationship that you feel comfortable enough to ask those questions.

The relationship she refers to is not only a reputation among colleagues for speaking up but also a connection with administrators that has been built by being a person who goes to them to voice concerns, propose ideas, and generally communicate on behalf of the teaching staff. By directly lobbying policymakers, communicating with various stakeholders, and creating resources and initiatives in response to what they perceive as wrongheaded policies, teacher leaders advocate for positive change within the profession.

Taken together, professional learning, collaboration, and advocacy are three domains within which teacher leaders distinguish themselves from their peers and engage in leadership action. Their actions and experiences in these areas help to operationalize a definition of a teacher leader.

Conceptualizing Informal Teacher Leadership

A second key finding of this research is that in addition to these three domains of teacher leadership action, teacher leaders hold two core beliefs: 1) teacher leadership is accessible to all teachers, not restricted to specific individuals or roles, and 2) teacher leadership is most importantly a shared endeavor concerned with collective capacity building, not an individual aspiration toward a particular role. When taken together, these two beliefs, in addition to the three domains of leadership action described above, paint a fuller picture of how teacher leaders conceptualize teacher leadership.

All teachers as leaders. One complicated aspect of conceptualizing the role of the informal teacher leader is distinguishing it from the work done by all teachers. Participants in this study believed that all teachers should have the opportunity to engage in leadership, and that given the opportunity, most teachers would engage in leadership action. As described in detail above, teacher leaders interviewed saw it as part of their work to encourage peers to take on leadership roles themselves, and cited examples where colleagues who hadn't considered taking such action found that they were gratified that they had. One participant explained, "All teachers have assets that shared properly could probably align with what we're talking about when we talk about teacher leadership." In addition to encouraging a leadership stance in colleagues, teacher leaders in this study expressed a belief that there are certain leadership actions that are in fact essential to the job of teaching, and that all teachers should engage in. I applied Fairman &

Mackenzie's (2012) model (see Appendix A) to their responses to categorize the types of leadership actions that participants cited as essential to the job of teaching. Participants believe that all teachers should engage in spheres A, B, and D from this model, which are respectively: engaging in learning about his or her practice, experimenting and reflecting, and collaborating and reflecting together on collective work. Participants believe that engagement in these spheres is essential to teaching well. One participant explained, "Through the action of leading you clarify your own thoughts and improve your own teaching." Further, participants expressed the idea that all teachers are influencers within their professional communities whether they intend to be or not, and with that comes a responsibility to stay abreast of best practices and work with colleagues to improve student learning. One participant expressed, "All teachers should see themselves as leaders. At the least, sharing ideas and being a part of the conversation. I think if more teachers were to see themselves like that and speak up like that it would cause a lot of positive change."

Collective capacity building. Participants were much more comfortable talking about teacher leadership as a collective and essential endeavor than they were talking about themselves or others as individual teacher leaders. Their reluctance to focus too much on the title of "teacher leader" seemed to be fueled by both a pragmatic understanding that the title wouldn't further their work, and a more philosophical belief that the work of teacher leadership is a shared endeavor rather than an individual pursuit. Teacher leaders interviewed were more interested in building toward a sense of collective efficacy than in further honing or defining their role as a teacher leader. When asked if they consider themselves teacher leaders all were willing to categorize themselves as such based on the leadership activities they engage in and the position they hold among their peers. However, many talked about how they would never use that title in

their daily context. One teacher explained, “I don’t like the power dynamic of that term. You want to nurture their success and there’s nothing wrong with that but I do think there’s something wrong with undermining an asset-based approach to the profession, you really start to mess with other people’s perceptions of what they’re capable of.” This teacher was concerned that identifying a single person or a small group of people as teacher leaders undermines the effort to engage all teachers in teacher leadership activities because other teachers would see the role and activities as reserved for someone else. He described “asset-based approach” as an approach that considers all teachers to have valuable assets (skills, knowledge, and strengths) that they can contribute in order to have a positive impact. In this way, all teachers could act as leaders, and he worries that by specifically identifying just a select few as leaders, one runs the risk of labeling others as non-leaders and thereby limiting their perception of what they are capable of.

Other teachers expressed a reluctance to claim that title among their peers because of a fear it would be viewed negatively and interpreted as if they thought they were better than their peers. One teacher leader explained,

I think it has to do with this system as a whole and the way that it's structured in terms of salary and in terms of stuff with the union is that the more experienced you are, you have a higher salary. And almost inherent in that is the idea that the more you've taught, the more you know, which I don't always think is true. I think that there is a reluctance among a lot of teachers to be seen as doing something different or doing something that makes them stand out in any way. So, I think that works two ways. Number one, I think [in my case] I don't want to draw extra attention to myself or I don't want anyone to think that I'm trying to brown nose administrators somewhere. It's really coming from me just

wanting to learn more and to do better for my students and for the students in the school. But second, I think it also comes from a place of... if one person does more work then the expectation will be that everyone has to do more work. So I think part of it is tension between not wanting to stand out and get unwanted, negative attention from other teachers in the district.

This teacher worries that if she were distinguished from her peers as a teacher leader, they would question her motives and perceive her to be challenging norms of seniority and egalitarianism. Even in her explanation of this concern she is quick to clarify her motives: that she just wants to learn more and do better for students.

Two teachers did self-identify with the title of teacher leader without much hesitation. One asked, "If you're not gonna toot your own horn, who will?" and explained that connecting with other teacher leaders all over the country gave her the confidence to own the role and title of teacher leader. She suggested that it can feel empowering to claim that role and to publicly highlight the active learning and sharing that she believes makes her a teacher leader. She describes her school culture as particularly positive and supportive and explains that she gets support for her leadership work from both her colleagues and her administration, so possibly her self-identification does not feel as counter-normative as it does to other teachers in different contexts.

Title aside, teachers expressed a belief that it's not about an individual person who is a leader so much as it is about the power of teacher leadership as a force for change. They mention that they've seen teachers take on leadership roles who they would not anticipate being particularly strong as leaders, only to be pleasantly surprised by the new perspective and abilities that they bring to the table. They talk about their leadership impact in terms of other teachers that

they have inspired to take on leadership roles. They don't want to be distinguished from their peers, but rather want to influence their peers to join them in their leadership work. They conceptualize teacher leadership as less focused on an individual role or identity ("teacher leader"), and instead see the role of the teacher leader as fluid as various teachers within a school or district work together to enact positive change. One teacher leader explained,

Teacher leadership is, I think in a school setting, it's shared leadership in the best sense, right? It's the idea that you're giving teachers a voice, you're giving them agency, you're sort of eroding the rigid structure of the school system where administrators have to be a one stop shop for everything, right? They have to have all the answers. It's really giving teachers a say and letting them problem solve.

This teacher leader actively works toward this vision of teachers as a source for leadership by encouraging colleagues to spearhead initiatives and facilitating partnerships between teachers who are interested in achieving common goals. He counsels teachers in how best to approach administrators or formal school leaders with ideas or proposals, and helps colleagues find time to meet and work together. He understands teacher leadership as an inherently shared and collaborative force for change, and an avenue through which to build the collective capacity of teachers as professionals.

Teacher leaders believe that all teachers should have the opportunity to engage in leadership activities and will benefit from this engagement. Further, teacher leaders are more interested in the opportunity for collective capacity building that teacher leadership represents than they are in claiming or embodying the role or title of "teacher leader." These two beliefs paint a compelling picture of teacher leadership as a collective force for change, and stand in

contrast to conceptualizations of teacher leadership that focus on the individual or a specific title or role.

Motivations to Lead

Classroom teachers who engage in leadership activities are often doing uncompensated work that is beyond their job description and responsibilities. So: why do they do it? Teacher leaders are motivated to engage in leadership activities in order to engage in learning to improve their own practice, forge connection and community, and enact a certain level of professionalism. Positively influencing student learning is a theme that runs throughout each of these motivators. Teacher leaders frequently expressed the hope that their leadership actions would improve student learning, and identified the ability to positively influence more students as a motivating factor. These sources of motivation compelled teachers to serve as informal teacher leaders in spite of the additional work and stressors.

Learn and improve practice. Teacher leaders often explained their motivation to engage in leadership work by describing themselves as people who are intrinsically driven to keep striving and learning in whatever they dedicate themselves to. Their first reactions were to say things like, “It’s just who I am” and “I couldn’t really be any other way.” Upon further explanation it became clear that this was linked to a deep desire to learn and grow. One participant explained, “For myself if I’m not actively trying to improve at something I’m doing, I feel like I’m going backwards. I have to feel like I’m learning more stuff. Hopefully that impacts students and helps them learn more. I get obsessed with whatever I take on and I want to figure out the best that I can do.” This desire to actively improve his teaching practice pushes him toward leadership activities such as publishing a blog, presenting at conferences, and leading a professional learning community in his school. As he notes, he hopes that his work positively

influences students, but his own professional and intellectual growth is as much a motivator as his desire to help students.

Another teacher leader echoes this sentiment and identifies it as perhaps in some sense selfishly motivated. He explains,

Some of it is selfish and not in a bad way. I just think for me I can't do the same thing every year, so a lot of my leadership actually I think grows from my own reflectiveness. Every summer and any free chance I get, I am like devouring literature and teaching books and twitter stuff and I get really excited, and when I get really excited I want to share it with people. So a lot of it starts with, for me, trying to get myself to be a better teacher or just trying to learn something for myself and how it would affect me. And then when I decided something's a good idea or something that's a good practice, I just find that it's impossible for me to keep it to myself because why would I, you know, it's just going to help everybody else.

For this teacher, leadership activities feel like a natural outgrowth of his desire to learn and try new things in his classroom. Teacher leaders expressed that there is a degree to which this kind of dedication to improving one's practice has to be intrinsically motivated. In saying this they reference again the idea of the "lowest common denominator" or "bare minimum" you can do to be a teacher and keep your job. That "bare minimum" doesn't usually necessitate that you innovate your instructional practices. One teacher leader explained,

Teaching is a profession where we do generally the same thing every single year in that you see a number of like 25 kids four times or five times a day and you do that for 180 days and you're in a profession that you're probably going to be there for 25 years or so. And it's really easy to try to make it repetitive and to try to do exactly the same thing you

did the year before because you already went through the trouble of figuring out how to [that]. So it ends up being really easy to *not* innovate, you know, and it's like you are rewarded for not innovating because innovating is hard. Getting out of your comfort zone. So I think that leadership is trying to get people to do that even though the whole profession is pushing you towards doing the same thing you did last year because you don't have a lot of time. So rather than have taken time to come up with new ideas or to try something different that might not work, you've already made it through last year and that seemed to go okay, so let's just do that again.

This teacher sees one aspect of leadership as a willingness to innovate your practice in spite of the other forces that make that difficult and in spite of the fact that it isn't necessarily or always required. That piece of intrinsic motivation is what teacher leaders seem to attribute to just a part of who they are. Even still, they believe that this kind of attitude and motivation can be inspired in others, and have had experiences seeing that happen. That knowledge helps them feel like their own dedication to improvement can have a positive influence on their colleagues and therefore on a larger number of students. By engaging in professional learning and working actively to improve their practice, they can change the status quo and more of their colleagues will follow suit. Their successes in this area, especially seeing their colleagues adopt leadership roles, help them feel impactful.

Connection and community. Teacher leaders are motivated by the opportunities to connect with like-minded individuals that leadership actions provide. They see their individual leadership as heavily influenced by their various learning communities, and greatly enjoy the experience of working collaboratively with these colleagues. In many cases their leadership roles connect them with other teachers who are outside of their immediate contexts which are defined

by grade level, subject, and school building. By engaging in professional conferences or serving on district-wide committees they have the opportunity to build a community that fortifies their practice. When asked what motivates him to engage in leadership actions, one teacher explained,

I mean the biggest thing is probably that we're gonna all be doing the same job, you know, whether you teach English, whether you teach High School, Elementary. I mean we're all teaching students and I think we all have an easier job and we're doing a better job or helping kids more if we can kind of help each other. So you know, some of its community. A lot of it's community.

This desire for community relates back to teacher leaders' interest in building teacher leadership as a force for positive change. Rather than focused on individual aspirations, they explain that they are motivated by the positive experience of working with their colleagues to find inspiration. Another teacher explains, "I really believe the people you surround yourself with has a disproportionate impact on who you are. Going somewhere to be surrounded by teachers who are dedicated to the profession in the same way I am energizes me to do the job better. I know it's an important job. I don't want to be a shitty teacher."

Teacher leaders draw energy and inspiration from engaging with like-minded individuals in the pursuit of leadership action. Their leadership actions help them work outside of their immediate classroom context, and this helps them build a professional learning network that ultimately motivates their work to improve their practice within the classroom. Teacher leaders cite a variety of professional groups that they engage in to find this kind of collaboration and motivating energy. One teacher leader started a Facebook group designated for positive "teacher-talk" where teachers from all different contexts can share ideas. She described,

I started a private Facebook group for any teacher, no matter level or if I know them or not, where we come and we share ideas or the new happenings or ‘Hey, I picked this up at target’ or ‘Does anyone know how to deal with a student with Autism symptoms?’ Just little things where you can come and it's a positive setting. A place to have different educators be able to chime in on different topics.

She explained that she and other educators like connecting in this way because it’s more “free;” it’s on their own time and not mandated. They can direct their conversations based on need and interest, and their learning and connection is not based on any particular school context.

On a much larger scale, another teacher leader founded what he described as “a network of teachers with the intention of creating the time and space for collaboration and support, growth, and sharing best practices in teaching and learning intentionally across all sectors.” By “all sectors” he is referring to the charter school/public school divide, which is a politically charged and divisive issue in his state. He was troubled by how the division between these two types of schools was negatively impacting teacher morale and collaboration, and hurting students by bringing politics into the education process. He described, “And so I set out to create the space where teachers across all sectors could meet and create platforms of sharing and support. And collaboration across disciplines, across grade levels and across all sectors.” This network has been steadily growing for three years. Teachers apply to join the network, are evaluated by a committee, and, if accepted, join a yearly cohort. This cohort attends a week-long summer workshop and then meets monthly throughout the year. They also participate in a closed online forum. When they meet, they use discussion protocols and engage in what he described as “teacher-led professional development.” This professional development includes workshops, Ed Camp style events, and book clubs, and has focused on such areas as building cultural

competency, embedding social-emotional goals into the curriculum, and incorporating mindfulness into teaching. They meet at public, private, and charter schools across the state to help build comfort and connection across these dividing lines. He described one of his goals as, “creating a community of like-minded professionals who can talk about and discuss issues that fall outside of that traditional professional development model” and he finds the work enormously fulfilling in that way.

While this example of building a statewide network is rather extraordinary, all participants describe drawing motivation from community and collaboration. Two other teacher leaders described their work building a network of informal teacher leaders within their school district. They attended state-organized professional development on new Teacher Leader Model Standards and formed a committee within the district that includes administrators in order to begin an initiative to support teacher leaders. So far, about twenty teachers across the district have joined this group and are working on individual leadership projects in response to identified needs. These teachers describe immense gratification from the collaboration that has come from this work.

Other collaborative efforts teacher leaders describe include building small PLC groups in their schools, engaging in Twitter chats and building online learning networks, joining professional organizations and attending conferences, and founding lunch groups or lesson-study groups designed to figuratively open up the walls of their classrooms and invite colleagues in. Teacher leaders believe deeply in the power of collaboration and the fulfillment they derive from their various forms of collaboration motivates them to continue their leadership work. One teacher explained, “When you find a situation where the collective is greater than the sum of the

parts, that's just magic. And you have to kind of mine experiences and contacts and relationships that create that. That is absolutely what fuels [my work].”

Professionalism. Finally, teacher leaders are motivated to engage in leadership work because of a deep commitment to and belief in the value of the profession. Most participants described that they want to feel as if they are making a positive impact on students in their daily work, and leadership helps them feel they are working to fulfill a high level of professionalism in their roles. This desire is what motivates them to “go above and beyond” as so many of them describe their leadership actions. One teacher leader explained he is “kind of a deep thinker” who thinks in terms of big ideas and global concepts. He thinks about mortality and about his impact on the world. He goes on to explain,

I don't want to waste my life. So I'm always thinking, teaching has to mean something or I should just get some other job. [Thinking this way] really does impact me. I don't know if everybody else thinks that way, but I don't want to... at the end of the day I have a job that I feel really proud of and if I'm not really doing it then I can't be proud of it. My whole being is about feeling proud of myself and doing stuff that matters, and if I'm just following along somebody else's plan, like going through the lesson plans that were there before and just being that worker bee in a system or something like that... to me it doesn't seem like a meaningful life at all. So it's really a global kind of thought. It's not like I'm motivated by rewards or any of that kind of stuff. I really see it as like, ‘Hey, if I'm not doing this then it's kind of a waste of time and I'm not into wasting time.’

This desire for his job to “mean something” is what motivates him to invest extra time and energy in it, and to try to positively influence those around him. His motivation is deeply

intrinsic, not linked to any extrinsic rewards or ambitions. His goal and intention is to be able to feel like he can be really proud of the work he's doing.

Another teacher describes his leadership work as an active refusal to be drawn down by the negative forces that he perceives to be working against the sacred public good of education. Working in a state deeply entrenched in battles over funding for public versus charter schools, he is disgusted by attempts to politicize the field of education. He is further outraged by the effect of merit pay or incentive pay on the profession. He explained,

I think that the notion that the common good, the shared public good of an education for children is a suitable space for market experiments is abhorrent. I don't like the idea that there is a false scarcity of something called a "good teacher." This bogeyman of a 'bad teacher' that they try to scare everybody with is a lever that doesn't serve our students and I don't know how much longer a system can survive under that kind of prolonged attack. And I think it will take teachers recognizing the beauty in one another to say, 'Oh, wait a second, I got this. I don't need to fear the person next to me. I need to work with them and we have more in common than we don't.'

This teacher sees his work to build a network of teachers and to foster collaboration as necessary to counter the negative and divisive impacts he perceives from outside forces. He wants teachers to collaborate, not compete. He believes that the latter goes against the essential nature of the job as one that is concerned first and foremost with the public good.

When asked to explain what motivates her to engage in leadership action, one teacher leader said simply, "It's important! Without instructional leaders, who is going to do this work to improve instruction?" Teacher leaders share a belief in the importance of the work of education and the necessity of providing effective instruction to students. They see their leadership action

as an essential piece of this effort. The leadership actions they engage in: sharing professional learning, collaborating with colleagues, spearheading initiatives, advocating for positive change-- these things are intended to improve student learning, a goal that teacher leaders see as fundamental to their jobs.

This shared overarching goal of improving student learning aligns with Fairman & Mackenzie's (2012) conceptualization of teacher leadership action, which places this goal at the center of the spheres of action. Teacher leaders want to improve student learning experiences and outcomes. One teacher leader explained, "It's the children. It's reaching the hearts and minds of the kids because that's really what it's about, you know, at the... that is my only motivation and that's what keeps me in that role of teacher leader because I want it to ultimately influence the experiences that our children have when they're in school and they're in these environments." Teacher leaders see their profession as a sacred opportunity to improve the learning and lives of their students, and they understand their leadership action as one avenue toward achieving this goal.

Perception of Impact of Leadership Actions

Participants believe that their leadership actions prompt changes in teachers' attitudes and behaviors. As evidence, they point to feedback from their colleagues directly stating changes in attitude and behavior based on the teacher leader's actions. This perceived impact aligns with participants' intentions, as they described using their position within their communities to positively influence their colleagues' attitudes and behaviors. All participants described a perceived influence in this way. In this section I outline a few examples of these experiences, in which teacher leaders work intentionally to influence their colleagues and then perceive a positive change that they attribute to those efforts. Each of these examples highlights a particular

type of change in attitude or behavior: influencing colleagues to engage in more positive teacher talk, changing instructional practices, reinvesting in their professional career, and engaging in leadership actions themselves.

Changing teacher talk. One teacher explained that he works diligently to positively impact the culture of his school by refusing to engage in negative “teacher room talk” and speaking up actively and openly when colleagues speak negatively about students or complain in a way that is harmful or unproductive. He explained,

There was a thing in teacher preparation where your professors would say don't go to the faculty room, don't go to the teacher's lounge, you know, you're going to hear negativity and no, stay out of that. And, you know, for a while I did, and then at some point I started to feel like it's not good enough to just stay away from that negativity. I mean if we're here to try and change lives of students...you really don't have any impact on most of the students in the school. So if you could try to change opinions and change attitudes of teachers then you have a greater impact on trying to change students' lives.

This teacher leader described making a concentrated effort over time to change the narrative within these spaces, working to speak positively about students and asking his colleagues to refrain from negatively categorizing students and speaking ill of them. Even though he admits he can only attest to changes in teacher talk that he is present for, he does perceive not only a shift over time in the tone of conversation in common work spaces but also experiences colleagues expressly thanking him for his positive influence. He described, “I hear that from other teachers like, ‘Hey, I'm glad you did that because that makes me uncomfortable to hear people talk about students in that way.’ So I do see that as an immediate impact on the staff.” His ultimate hope is that this change in teacher talk might positively influence student learning, but he recognizes that

any potential impact on student learning would be nearly impossible to trace back to his efforts.

He explained,

I'm a scientist so I like to see evidence of an experiment or something like that and it's hard to actually see that student learning improved because of it. But I just know my gut that when people have a better culture, better morale, that's going to have better impact. It's going to have positive impact on student learning. So I can see some of the signs of it, but I don't know.

Even if teacher leaders can't point to direct evidence of their impact, they do perceive changes over time that help them believe their actions are making a difference.

Changing instructional practices. When teacher leaders share learning with their colleagues, they often rely on feedback from those teachers as an indication of whether they have positively influenced that teacher's instructional practices. One teacher leader who writes a blog explained he'll hear from people who were influenced by his writing and had positive experiences implementing his ideas in the classroom. He described,

People have written to me just in response to stuff that I've written and said, 'I tried this in my classroom and it worked. It worked well.' That's always pretty profound because it's generally a stranger. And just by recording... that's back to your last question of why all teachers should do some leading action. It's like, all I did was write it down and kind of process stuff that I was working on and through sharing that it has helped another teacher. Or one guy from California, he just wrote me a letter last year to say that he'd read [my book] and it made him give his students the choice to read the books they want. So for me, those, those things have definitely been the biggest signs of impact

because when somebody has taken the opportunity to share how they've used that idea, that seems like it's maybe, hopefully having a little bit of a ripple effect.

For teacher leaders, these kinds of positive testimonials help them feel that they are having a positive impact on teachers' instructional practices. Again, their language around this perceived impact demonstrates that they can't know for sure, but they "hope" that their work positively influences teacher practice and student learning.

When it comes to influencing teacher practice within their schools, teacher leaders sometimes have a slightly better opportunity to gauge whether their actions have changed their colleagues instructional practices. One teacher leader described inviting her colleague into her room to see something new she was trying, and then meeting with her afterward to discuss the visit and the strategy. That teacher went on to not only adopt the strategy but also share what she was doing with her grade-level colleagues. The teacher leader could see the impact of her work more clearly in this instance because the teacher went on to share the practice more widely in a way that was visible to the teacher leader.

Another teacher described working to start a new initiative and when word spread, teachers asked her to visit their classrooms and help them implement the initiative as well. These requests evidenced that the work she had done to pilot a new instructional practice was influencing her colleagues to adopt the practice too. Another teacher described that after sharing a new strategy with colleagues she was happy to hear that they were trying it and having success. She explained,

[I notice my impact] when [the teachers] find me in the halls and they're just like, 'We tried this and it really worked' or 'I really like this' or 'I took your idea but I did something else with it.' Just when I feel like I inspire teachers to try something new or

when they try something and put their own spin on it, that that's what makes me happy.

And to me that's the measure of if I'm doing a good job as a leader.

Receiving this kind of feedback from colleagues is very important to teacher leaders when they consider the impact of their leadership work. They are gratified and encouraged to learn that practices they share or model are adopted by their colleagues, and they view this feedback as one of the more tangible signs of their influence.

Reinvesting in professional careers. Some teacher leaders perceive evidence of their impact in their colleagues' recommitment or investment in professional learning. They believe that by modeling stances of ongoing professional learning and by creating or fostering communities that value more professional stances, they positively influence other teachers. One teacher explained that he used to be the only person in his school attending professional conferences but after encouraging his colleagues to attend and participate, many more have joined professional organizations and engage in that type of professional learning. Likewise, one teacher leader described having successfully encouraged her colleagues to participate in a professional learning community with her.

Another teacher leader, who founded a larger cooperative of teachers to create a supportive community, hears again and again what an impact that work is having. He describes, "I get a pretty steady stream of handwritten letters and notes afterwards of teachers saying that this was either my 10th year of teaching or my 25th year teaching or my second year teaching, and I've been looking for this, this group of people my whole career, I was hopeful that this was going to be out there." This teacher even explained that anecdotally, he knows that his work has positively influenced teachers to stay in the profession. He recounts,

Hearing many teachers say ‘I was ready to go, I was going to call it a year, this is it for me, but knowing that I have this [learning community] means I'm getting back in that classroom recharged and ready to go and not going to retire. I'm not going to consider what else is out there.’ Those anecdotal pieces of ‘I'm staying in this game, I'm teaching longer because of what we've built together.’

This teacher leader believes that the community of teachers he has built within his state is having a positive effect on teacher retention, and is thinking about how to investigate that outcome in a formal way because he has been so gratified and excited to notice that impact. By fostering spaces for professional growth through community, teacher leaders are able to help their colleagues reinvest in the profession and engage meaningfully in professional learning.

Engaging in leadership. Teacher leaders relay that they are often able to encourage colleagues to take on leadership roles themselves. They consider this impact to be particularly profound because of their shared belief that teacher leadership should be collective capacity building that encourages all teachers to engage in professional learning, collaboration, and advocacy. They describe feeling excited to see their colleagues take on leadership roles that they may not have before, such as facilitating workshops, joining collaborative committees, or spearheading change initiatives. One teacher described the experience of watching a teacher she had informally mentored flourish in her career. She explained,

Just having that one-on-one relationship with her changed her mindset on how she viewed herself as an educator. So now she felt more comfortable to move into a formal leadership role where she's a teacher leader now of our grade level, so now it's not only me in that positive frame set in my school of being able to be a teacher leader and influence change, now because I've been able to impact her mindset on how she views

herself in her job now she felt comfortable enough to move into a position of a formal leadership role. So now we *together* can now influence more students and more people, more peers, more administrators, as teacher leaders together.

As in this case, teacher leaders seem to feel particularly successful when they influence others to take on leadership activities or roles. They are pleased to see someone engage more fully in the profession, happy to have additional opportunities that arise for collaboration, and particularly hopefully about the increased potential to positively impact more students by engaging more teachers in professional learning and leading. One teacher leader explained,

I think that's where I have the power to make the greatest impact because if people are able to change their mindset about what they do in the field of education, then no longer is it just me as a teacher leader influencing others, but if I can empower and change their mindset on a particular topic, law, or lesson then they are changed and they are able to influence change or bring about positive results in the school community.

By helping colleagues take on leadership roles, teacher leaders believe they can have an exponential impact on students and the profession. As they reflected on their impact as teacher leaders, participants recognized that the “fruits of their labor” can be diffuse or delayed, making it difficult, if not impossible, to measure and quantify impact. Indeed, the evidence they point to is only self-reported, we cannot conclude causality, and their impact is likely uneven over people and time. However, an important finding of this research is that teacher leaders do perceive a direct impact on teachers’ practice as a result of their leadership work, and they hope that this impact on teacher practice positively impacts student learning down the line.

Facilitating and Constraining Conditions for Informal Teacher Leadership

When teacher leaders considered their leadership work, they were able to identify various factors that influenced their ability to engage in that work and their ultimate success toward their goals. Across these factors, four major categories emerged: their status as classroom teachers; relationships with colleagues; principal or administrative influence; and time constraints. In addition, the only non-white teacher leader in this study identified race as an influencing factor.

Status as classroom teachers. Teacher leaders see their position as classroom teachers as quite influential to their leadership work. For the most part, teacher leaders identified their classroom status as essential to not only their professional knowledge but also their credibility. Some teacher leaders felt very strongly about this point. One explained, “I think it's the only real source of credibility. I think very few people could stop doing something and then tell other people how to do it or give them tips on how to do it. I just think it's the raw material that allows me to keep learning and to share with others.” Another echoed this sentiment, explaining that the professional learning co-op that he’s founded really relies on his status as a classroom teacher. He explained “ [teaching is] still the best job. It's such a fun, exciting, ever-changing, complex thing, but also I think from the perspective of the development of this program, there's a pretty wide credibility gap that opens up [if I’m not a classroom teacher].” Another participant explained that this credibility gap is one of the reasons that he feels it’s harder for administrators in schools to enact change in the teaching staff than it is for teacher leaders to have that positive impact. He explained,

I think when people take on official leadership roles in terms of administrative roles, sometimes they lose some of that trust. There sometimes is this them-versus-us mentality between teachers and administration. It's not bad at my school by any means, but I do

think that teachers are more willing to listen to people who are still teaching. I don't think that's always the case and I have some great principals and some good supervisors who can certainly make an impact in the classroom. But I think that they have a harder task at doing that because the flippant teacher, the frustrated teacher, I think is more likely to say, yeah, but they don't have to do that on a day-to-day basis or they don't have to deal with students or they haven't taught in X amount of years.

This teacher leader emphasized that not only was it important for a teacher leader to be a classroom teacher in terms of credibility and impact, but it was also important that that person be perceived as a good teacher. He explained,

The second part of that though is that you do still have to kind of walk the walk. It would be really easy for me to be met with derision or sort of being counted out if I was a teacher who was known as being the worst teacher in my department. And constantly standing up at workshops and saying, "Oh, these are the things that make a good teacher." I do think you have to be a good teacher or at least be recognized as such or be somebody who people think of as a good teacher to be an effective teacher leader.

Though teacher leaders felt strongly that their status as classroom teachers was essential to their credibility as leaders, they did express a belief that the lack of role formalization as an official leader was sometimes problematic. Interestingly, this lack of official title seemed to impact their sense of credibility in a different and negative way. Though their classroom status gave them credibility among their peers as someone who is preaching what they practice and is fully in touch with the realities of being a classroom teacher, there is a flip side to that that can call into question what exactly gives them their platform as a leader. One teacher leader explained,

I think it's also a double-edged sword because I think that even though teachers know who I am and know who I am as a professional, I think that there's a tendency to downplay the work I'm doing because I'm just a teacher. I'm not an administrator. I'm not an instructional coach. I'm not, you know, a literacy consultant or whatever.

Further, this status as a classroom teacher might negatively influence teacher leaders' abilities to be impactful in their advocacy or work to make wider change. One teacher leader described an experience advocating at a board meeting where she felt dismissed because she was "just a teacher." She described,

I spoke at a board meeting during the open session and it was just like, "You got one minute left. Two minutes left." It was just no regard for...I felt like there was no regard for what I was saying. But I felt like if I were the "Student Assistance Coordinator" then what I had to say would have been more valued. But because I didn't have that title, it was just like, "All right, we heard ya."

Though teacher leaders agreed that their status as a classroom teacher was indispensable as a marker of credibility with which to elicit buy-in from their colleagues, they do recognize that without an official title they can sometimes be limited in the impact they are able to have within the system. Some teacher leaders referenced this as an example of how teachers are not always taken seriously as professionals, and there was a perception in some spaces that you are "just a teacher." One teacher leader explained, "The thing that kind of frustrates me the most is when, when teachers aren't really, or when sometimes I'm not respected for the professional that I am."

Finally, and perhaps as a more logistical or practical consideration, teacher leaders' status as a classroom teacher might sometimes make it hard for them to lead simply due to a lack of

time. As discussed in greater detail below, time is a major factor that influences teachers' leadership work, and the time it takes to both expertly engage in the craft of teaching and take on leadership responsibilities can be prohibitive. One teacher leader explained, "Because I am a teacher there are so many other responsibilities that I want to do an excellent job at that sometimes it limits me because there's so many other things that I have to accomplish." This is more of a conflict between time and job responsibilities than of title, but it certainly plays a role in teacher leaders' ability to engage in leadership work.

Relationships with colleagues. Teacher leaders view their relationships with other teacher leaders to be a major source of support of their leadership work. All teacher leaders interviewed described colleagues who inspire them and influence their leadership efforts. They often described the positive effect of working together with another teacher leader or other teacher leaders in their buildings and districts. Not only does this collaboration enrich the teacher leader's leadership action, but some felt that it could be downright impossible to accomplish this kind of work alone. One teacher leader described his first teaching job in a department and school that did not have any teachers visibly engaged in teacher leadership work. A new teacher joined his department and he witnessed her unsuccessful efforts to engage her colleagues in leadership activities. He described,

In my old district [there was a teacher who] was putting herself out there to try to create cohesion and an atmosphere of professional development, but nobody was really into it. And she was brand new. She would just do things like bring articles to a meeting and hand them out or say that she had a copy of a really good book in her room and she'd ask people to borrow it. And my point is that if you have at least one other person, that you

can even kinda team up with, one or two other people [to talk about] what actions you would take and not just feel like you're doing it on your own. I think that's a big support. This teacher leader contrasted this experience with what he witnessed at his next job, where three colleagues were actively working to institute Professional Learning Communities rather than monthly department meetings. He explained that they would meet together to brainstorm and game-plan, and he was able to witness that work and eventually join in himself. When faced with setbacks or challenges, these teachers were able to turn to each other, a fact that he believes was influential in their ability to continue pursuing the initiative. He explained,

[Without seeing these teachers] I think I would have been less likely to think that teacher leadership, in terms of one teacher can help the teachers in one's own department, would be effective. I don't think I would have seen that as much if I didn't see what these colleagues did to create the new teacher support groups. So to kind of extrapolate that I think that having at least one other teacher in your same department who buys into the concept of teacher leadership is really important.

For this teacher, witnessing one teacher leader try without success to enact positive change was sharply contrasted with the success of three teachers who were working toward change together. He attributed much of their success to their collaborative effort and the support they were able to draw from each other.

The power of this collaboration with colleagues was evident in how teacher leaders described their work and what makes it possible. Many of the successful initiatives that they describe involve a collaborative effort with another teacher they identify as a teacher leader. One teacher described,

With my colleague, my first grade colleague, we've organized some kind of informal lunch sessions to do [this kind of professional learning] with other teachers. We invited teachers to come and we talked about something like conferring during Reading and Writing Workshop, something that we thought would be helpful to the teachers and ourselves as well. Just getting ideas from each other, seeing what kind of support we could provide for each other.

Another example came from a teacher who worked with another colleague to deprivatize instructional practice in his school by piloting peer visits. He explained,

We have another teacher who, with me, we started these open classroom Wednesdays where it's like less formal and on a Wednesday in a given month we'll say, 'everybody, here are all the classrooms that are willing to have visitors' and people will come in and like pop in and pop out. You can talk to each other's students, talk to the teacher, and it's just a way of seeing other people's practice.

Working together with other teacher leaders seemed to be a hallmark of successful initiatives, and quite fundamental to how teacher leaders view their work. These relationships among teacher leaders within a school or district help teacher leaders to see their work as part of a larger, shared effort. One teacher described her leadership work as a shared commitment founded on the support of her colleagues and a shared vision. She explained,

I think it's really just kind of a shared commitment with the teachers in my building and in my district and I think it just has to do with our relationships with each other and being willing to put ourselves out there and to do the extra work on top of what we're already doing in our classrooms. Just to support each other. I would say that it really comes from

the shared sense of: we want to improve what we're doing and we want to help other teachers in our school improve as well.

The common thread was that this leadership work was not work easily undertaken alone. Teacher leaders see their relationships with other teacher leaders and their ability to collaborate as fundamental to their work. One teacher leader explained, “The biggest support is just having coworkers who are also leaders and also see themselves as teacher leaders, where we could rally together towards a specific cause or effort.” This sense of “rallying together” conveys the shared sense of teacher leaders that their collaboration with their colleagues not only helps them work toward a common goal but also overcome setbacks and revive their energy and enthusiasm to engage in the work.

And what of the naysayers? Teacher leaders acknowledge the difficulty of encountering other colleagues who hold negative attitudes or resist engaging in efforts toward positive change, but they try not to pay it much mind. One teacher leader explained, “I kind of live by that whole like ‘the wolf you feed is the one that thrives’ [adage] and so I don’t spend time thinking about that part of it or paying any attention to it other than like, ‘Oh really? They said what? All right, whatever.’” When questioned on this topic other teachers were equally unmoved by the effect of negativity from colleagues. Another teacher leader explained, “I guess it's kind of hard for me to say because I’ve never really cared nor has it ever changed the way that I've taught or gone after projects or anything like that. I’ve always had a pretty good relationship with whoever was here. I like people.”

Principal or administrative influence. Though teacher leaders view their leadership work as intrinsically motivated and self-directed, when asked about factors that support or hinder this work most teachers mentioned administrative influence within their school buildings.

Participants spoke about principals or building leaders who not only supported their leadership actions but encouraged or nurtured them.

One way principals did this was by suggesting that the teacher leaders share their learning with colleagues, and providing the space and time to do so. One principal set up learning walks so that a teacher leader could continue his work to share and deprivatize some new instructional methods. Another provided professional learning time for the staff so that the teacher leader could share his experiences trying an ungraded unit. In a few cases, participants described gaining a sense of confidence to step out of their comfort zones and share learning with staff because their principals were encouraging them to do so.

Another way principals supported leadership action was by providing the necessary approval to attend professional conferences and engage in other professional learning opportunities. Principals didn't provide funding for attendance at workshops, but they did approve the time away from the classroom, and communicate to teacher leaders that they thought it was worthwhile. In one case a teacher leader described receiving release time from a duty to pursue his work with a teacher leadership initiative.

By and large, teacher leaders describe principals who communicate to them that they value their work and see them as a positive force within the school. They communicate a respect for the teacher leaders' leadership actions. One teacher leader described, "I'd definitely say a big support is an administrator who respects and trusts me as a leader. They have that sense of respect for me as a professional. [I have] a building administrator who is not afraid to relinquish control, and who does not necessarily micromanage."

Though teacher leaders recognize building leaders' support as very valuable to their leadership efforts, they do not describe an unsupportive building leader as prohibitive to

engaging in leadership work. They simply see a supportive principal as a factor that makes it easier for them to have an influence. When faced with an unsupportive building leader, they still engage in their leadership work. One teacher leader explained,

I don't think that ever stopped me from operating in that role as a teacher leader. I think it just... I just met more resistance because of the school climate due to certain administrators, but I don't think it ever stopped me from pursuing or being who I naturally am as an educator.

Even still, she recognizes that the lack of principal support does restrict or limit the potential for positive influence that teacher leadership can have. She explained,

Having an administrator or even a superintendent or anyone in that role who micromanages and doesn't see the value of the teacher opinion or the teacher leader, then that kind of stifles the creativity or growth or even the impact that a teacher leader could have on the local school community.

Under those circumstances the work can't thrive and grow as well as it would under supportive circumstances. This is the opportunity cost of not having a supportive building leader.

Another teacher leader described his experience working under a principal and district leadership team who did not have a vision for teacher leadership or particularly value professional learning. In much the same way, he recognized that the teacher leadership continued in spite of this lack of support. He explained,

I think that the teacher leadership or the real professional leadership that was going on was happening almost despite the efforts of the principal and the other administrators in the district. It's happening sort of organically because teachers crave it and they really need it. So they work together with those people that are going to make teaching better. It

definitely should be fostered by the administrators, but instead it's almost like, 'well we've got to do it anyway.'

But again, he went on to explain that though the teacher leadership continued in spite of these unsupportive administrative conditions, it was certainly not ideal. He noted that though some teachers will pursue their leadership activities regardless of unsupportive building leaders, you lose other teachers by not fostering and supporting teacher leadership. He explained,

[In that case] you're teaming up against the bad structure and then you make some positive changes. But really, if it was fostered by people who understand the concept of having power *with* the staff rather than power *over* the staff, I think you can't go wrong if you're fostering that, like you're looking for it and you're making it explicit that that's what you need. [Because then] even people that are sort of on the fence with wanting to improve, they start to see that as, 'okay, well that is what my boss wants me to do, so I'll do it too.' And there's a lot of followers, you know, I'm not saying that in a negative way, you need followers. There are a lot of teachers that will just do what the boss tells them to do, you know? And you're losing all those people if you're not valuing it.

Though some teacher leaders will pursue their leadership activities regardless of building level support, many more will engage in those activities when the work is explicitly valued by the principal and other district leaders. For this teacher leader that is one of the reasons that principal support is an important factor in teacher leadership work.

Time constraints. Teacher leaders consistently identified time constraints as a limiting factor on their ability to engage in leadership work. Most participants described a lack of time as limiting to their leadership action mainly because their schedules are for the most part filled with teaching responsibilities. Their teaching remains the most pressing part of their job, and they

must find time for their leadership activities outside of their normal working hours. When asked what limits her ability to engage in leadership action, one teacher leader shared,

Time...you know, as someone who is engaging in this leadership work my priority obviously is the students in my classroom. So I have to use time during my lunch or time when I get in early before school or time at home to kind of pull together this other stuff. So that's always something that I feel like we never have enough of as teachers. We never have enough time to do what we want to do.

Another teacher leader echoed this sentiment, stressing that it is a universal lament of teachers. He explained, "There's just not enough time. I think every teacher K to 12 teacher all over the country would probably tell you that if they had more time they could get *x* done. I don't think that'll ever change." In the particular case of teacher leaders, this often means that even if they manage to find time to spearhead an initiative or try something new, they can't manage to continue to invest time in that endeavor the way they would like to or recognize is needed. One teacher leader explained, "I don't always have the time to do follow up because it's an additional role that I've taken on." Her leadership activities are in addition to her teaching responsibilities, and there is simply not time in the day. Another teacher leader described finding time to go into colleagues' classes to share a new strategy, but failing to follow up on those visits. Without the follow-up, she fears that teachers aren't really able to implement the new strategy, even if the intention is there. She explained,

I think it's hard being an informal leader and having that follow-up time. I think maybe that's something for next school year that I can strive to do more, is more follow-up. Like after I go in and do a lesson and model something, asking how it's going or if they need help or if they need anything moving forward. It's hard. I don't drive our professional

development sessions. I've offered to do professional development sessions during our PD days. My offer has not always been accepted. But I think the scope of how you influenced your colleagues depends on your follow-up with it. You do need to follow up, follow through with things, and it's definitely hard when your schedules don't line up.

In addition to mentioning the difficulty of finding time to meet with differing schedules, this teacher leader mentioned that her informal status limits her control over those factors. There may be professional development time in the year, but she is not necessarily in a position to determine how that time will be used.

Not surprisingly, teacher leaders noted when administrators do set aside time for them to meet collaboratively with their colleagues. Most do not have much or any time in their day designated to collaborating with colleagues or working on any projects related to change outside their own classrooms. The teacher leaders that do have some time to collaborate built into their schedules recognize this time as valuable. One teacher leader described a new common planning period that he uses very intentionally as an avenue for positive work with his colleagues. He explained,

But now we have this time every week that we can sit down with the teachers that we teach with that are in the same subject. So I have like three days a week where I can... I have more time than I used to have basically. So that allows us more time to use for planning for a course. And I've always looked at that time as time to improve rather than trying to maintain what you're doing. So whenever we slip into like grading papers during that time or like setting up a lab or something, I kind of snap out of that and try to get the other teachers... who I also think are pretty professional, so they're not mad at me sort of saying, 'Hey, let's stop grading papers and let's talk about how can we do this better next

year when we do it.' So in instruction as well as just attitudes and trying to sort of raise the bar.

This example highlights the reality that simply having the time wouldn't necessarily lead to leadership action, as this teacher recognizes when he describes the natural inclination to use the time to grade papers and set up labs. But his influence, as someone who intentionally focuses on improving instruction, elevates the use of that time by engaging colleagues in collaborative reflection. This is an example of the often hidden influence of teacher leaders.

Another teacher leader described a similarly successful shift to incorporating collaborative time in the school day. In this case he described that administrators have set a tone or expectation of this time being expressly designated for collaboration, and that this collaboration is important and valued. He explained,

You need time to do all of these things. You need to have time to talk to other teachers. You have to be given, by your principles and other teacher leaders, you have to be given time to try things out and have conversations and stuff. In the example of how this is working in my school now, this is something that the superintendent and the principals have said that this is important enough that every day there's going to be time for a teacher to work with another teacher.

He goes on to explain that this time not only makes the needed collaboration possible, but it establishes the work as valuable and important, which has a positive influence on the way that his colleagues think about their instructional practices and their responsibility to improve that practice. By allocating a valuable resource (time) to this work, the administration signaled its importance.

Some teacher leaders referenced feeling overwhelmed by the demands of their jobs and the way that feeling hinders their ability to engage in leadership activities and their ability to motivate their colleagues to engage as well. Leadership actions are motivated by “bigger picture” thinking, in which the teacher considers an impact beyond the scope of their classroom and beyond the bare minimum of their job requirements. So when workloads become unmanageable or factors beyond their control heap additional stressors, they notice that their leadership activities are negatively impacted. One teacher leader explained,

It goes back to time again, but like any kind of stresses that keep you from wanting to think globally, you know, [that make it so] you're really focusing only on yourself. So things like, you know, when standardized testing happens and your schedule gets screwed up. Then you have to just really burrow in and focus on how you're going to get through it. That kinda keeps it from happening.

These kinds of influences shift a teacher’s stance to more of a survival mode, and limit their ability to think and act in a more global way about instruction and student learning. Even this teacher’s word choice of “burrow in” conveys the solitary, narrow focus that results from outside pressures that make it more difficult simply to accomplish the daily work of teaching. Teacher leaders balance quite a bit when they assume leadership activities beyond the scope of their normal classroom teaching responsibilities, and time, or lack thereof, is a major influencing force in their ability to engage in those activities.

Racial bias. Only one of the ten participants interviewed self-identified as a person of color, and this teacher identified her racial identity as a black woman as a factor that influences her leadership practice. The teaching profession is still largely dominated by white women. According to data collected by the U.S. Department of Education, in the 2015-2016 school year

about 80 percent of all public school teachers were non-Hispanic White, 9 percent were Hispanic, 7 percent were non-Hispanic Black, and 2 percent were non-Hispanic Asian (Taie & Goldring, 2018). This participant in my study explained that she gets the feeling that people have certain ideas or stereotypes in their heads about black people that don't necessarily fit with how she presents herself and her role as a teacher leader. When she was awarded a prestigious award for her work as a teacher she felt as if people were surprised to see a person who looks like she does. She feels this same way at professional conferences where presenters are mostly white. Within her school she notes that there is an unspoken and subtle expectation that she might be better able to understand the experience of the black kids and advocate for the black kids than her white counterparts. She takes issue with this and asserts that everybody has a story, and that all teachers can connect with kids individually to understand their individual stories. She also recalls a time that a colleague made a racially insensitive joke and she was compelled to speak to the person one on one, but her identity as an informal leader within the school brought with it a sense of hierarchy that she didn't want, as if she were speaking from a position of power aligned with the administration. For this participant, race was a factor that influenced her experience as a teacher leader. Though race was not mentioned by the other participants, it is likely that racial privilege facilitates their leadership practices in ways that they are not aware of.

Key Themes: Collective Action and Professional Learning

There are two key themes that run throughout much of the findings presented above. These are collective action and professional learning. By collective action I refer to the leadership actions undertaken by teacher leaders in concert or collaboration with others. By professional learning I refer to any learning within or outside the classroom that teacher leaders engage in to advance their knowledge and practice. These two themes are present and salient in

enough of my findings to suggest that they hold a particular place of importance in the practice of informal teacher leadership, and thus warrant specific identification and analysis. The themes of collective action and professional learning are integral to the “what”, “why” and “how” of teacher leadership. In this concluding section I briefly identify the nature of each theme as it relates to “what” teacher leadership is, “why” teacher leaders engage in leadership action, and “how” they enact leadership.

Teacher leaders identify collective action as a hallmark of teacher leadership. Teacher leaders view teacher leadership not as a solitary or individual practice or role, but instead as an opportunity to work collaboratively with colleagues to enact positive change. They identify collaboration as a key element of *what* teacher leadership is. Further, collective action is a key element of *why* they engage in leadership action. They enjoy the experience of working together with colleagues toward a common goal, citing this collaboration or collective action as a motivating force for their work. They seek and are motivated by relationships with like-minded individuals. Finally, collective action is an important part of *how* they enact leadership. Teacher leaders call on existing relationships and build new relationships in their leadership endeavors. They aim to “spread” teacher leadership by engaging others in their practice and fostering collective engagement. In this way the theme of collective action runs throughout various elements of the practice of informal teacher leadership and warrants particular attention.

The same is true for professional learning. Just as with collective action, professional learning is a key component of an operationalized definition of teacher leadership. This is to say that professional learning is one part of *what* teacher leaders “do.” Informal teacher leaders engage in learning to further their knowledge and practice. Importantly, their classrooms are once source of this learning. Others include workshops, conferences, professional learning

communities, literature, additional schooling, and peers. In addition, professional learning is one reason *why* informal teacher leaders engage in leadership action. They are motivated to improve their craft, energized by the learning, and enjoy expanding their knowledge and skills. Finally, professional learning is part of *how* informal teacher leaders enact leadership. Their professional learning positions them as a source of knowledge, giving them credibility and something useful to offer their colleagues. They share professional learning as one method of leadership and influence. Any effort to further understand informal teacher leadership would be helped by attending to the ways that both collective action and professional learning run throughout many different aspects of the practice.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study provides a window into how teacher leaders themselves think about teacher leadership. This section outlines three key contributions this study makes to the body of research on teacher leadership. First, findings from this study contribute to the operationalization of informal teacher leadership, aligning with previous research and providing further evidence that teacher leadership begins in the classroom. Second, findings from this study also establish the importance of teacher leaders' status as classroom teachers for building credibility amongst their peers and inspiring their work. Third, findings from this study underscore the notion that all teachers can be leaders and that teacher leadership can build the collective capacity needed to reculture and further professionalize teaching. Some of this work involves redefining participation within their community of practice. This section concludes with implications for stakeholders and future research, as well as a description of the study limitations.

Operationalizing Teacher Leadership

A contribution of this study is the opportunity to hear directly from informal teacher leaders how they conceive of and experience the role. Their descriptions of their colleagues' leadership actions and their own leadership actions help to clarify the distinction they draw between leading and teaching and what they think it means to be a teacher leader.

As explored in my review of the literature, one of the most influential definitions of teacher leadership comes from York-Barr and Duke's (2004) seminal review of two decades worth of teacher leadership research. York-Barr and Duke write,

We suggest that teacher leadership is 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. Such leadership work involves three intentional development foci: individual development, collaboration or team development, and organizational development. (p. 288)

This definition categorizes teacher leadership work as a means of influence over the school community, founded on the goal of improving learning and teaching practices to improve student learning. The authors begin to operationalize this definition by identifying three foci for that leadership work. In 2012, Fairman and Mackenzie built upon this conception of teacher leadership by further fleshing out the actions of teacher leaders. Their model, Spheres of Teacher Leadership Action for Learning (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012), depicts the “non-linear, non-continuous” work of teacher leaders in nine spheres of teacher leadership activity.

Participants in my study validated both York-Barr and Duke’s (2004) definition and Fairman and Mackenzie’s (2012) model by identifying leadership activity represented in each of these nine spheres and recognizing their leadership work as organized around improving student learning. Collectively, participants gave examples of leadership work in each of the nine spheres. Further, they described engagement in these spheres as fluid and emphasized engagement in various actions at different points in their careers, validating the “non-linear, non-continuous” description by Fairman and Mackenzie. The leadership work that participants described did not fall outside of the spheres represented in this model, reinforcing the utility of the model as one that encompasses all forms of teacher leadership action.

An important, and perhaps controversial, aspect of this model is its inclusion of individual teacher work inside the classroom. While the authors note that this work is limited in focus and scope, they include it as part of a larger picture of leadership activity. Participant responses in my study reinforce the importance of beginning with the classroom when we

conceptualize teacher leadership work. One teacher cited his work within the classroom as “the raw material that allows me to keep learning and to share with others.” For many teachers, it is decisions they make to deepen their own professional knowledge or innovate instructional practices within their classrooms that begin their journey into teacher leadership. That teacher leadership work might originate from individual improvement within the classroom is perhaps a hallmark of this particular source of leadership: it is precisely the teacher’s placement within the classroom that grants them a unique position to lead and motivates their work.

Including individual teacher practice within their classrooms in the operational definition of teacher leadership is significant for two reasons. One, it recognizes teachers’ pursuit of additional knowledge or improved practices as foundational to additional leadership activities. Two, it accounts for the influence they have over their colleagues simply by challenging the status quo. In their decision to act “above and beyond” the basic job requirements, they model a professional stance that can be influential precisely because of their peer status. Teacher leaders in this study identified their efforts to deepen their professional knowledge and skills as leadership. They believe that this work they do in their classrooms, and the example they set, eventually influences their colleagues. When they reflect on their leadership actions, they point to examples that illustrate changes to their practice influenced their colleagues. This influence comes from setting an example that others might choose to emulate and by establishing themselves as credible sources of knowledge or experience due to the work that they are doing to deepen their classroom practice. Fairman and Mackenzie (2014) note that these individual actions model a commitment to professional learning that challenges the status quo, and thereby act as an important form of leadership.

The Unique Position of The Classroom Teacher

Teacher leaders' position as classroom teachers emerged as foundational to their leadership work in two important ways. One, it established credibility among their peers that, in turn, facilitated their leadership work. Formalizing their role as a teacher leader would diminish their peer status and thus their credibility. Two, it motivated and inspired their leadership work by providing an ongoing impetus for improving their instructional practices. Teacher leaders' status as classroom teachers ensures a proximity to student learning that is crucial to an understanding of this particular source of leadership.

Credibility. Teacher leaders expressed a reluctance to formalize their roles or publicly claim the title of teacher leader within their schools. This reluctance aligns with the body of research that finds that role formalization can work counterproductively to the efforts of teacher leaders and result in diminished centrality and trust (Barth, 2001; Donaldson et. al., 2008; Fairman & Mackenzie, 2014; Lieberman & Friedrich, 2007; Mangin, 2005; Stoelinga, 2008). Because teacher leaders in this study held no formal titles or roles, they maintained a peer status that was valuable to them. One participant explains, "I do think that teachers are more willing to listen to people who are still teaching." Previous research has demonstrated that teachers who adopt formal roles are rendered less effective by the loss of their peer status (Lieberman & Friedrich, 2007; Mangin, 2005; Stoelinga, 2008). Participants in this study expressed little desire to formalize their roles and avoided creating any perception among their peers that they were separate or different. It seems that maintaining this peer status can be a delicate balancing act. Teacher leaders are at once establishing themselves as sources of knowledge for their colleagues and avoiding the perception that they think they are more knowledgeable or capable than their colleagues. Additionally, teacher leaders spoke about avoiding the perception that they were

trying to “look good” to their administrators or otherwise seeking preferential treatment or recognition from administrators. One participant explained, “I think [in my case] I don't want to draw extra attention to myself or I don't want anyone to think that I'm trying to brown nose administrators somewhere. It's really coming from me just wanting to learn more and to do better for my students and for the students in the school.” This teacher leader wants to have a positive influence on his peers but is hesitant to distinguish himself in any way.

The path to resolving this conundrum seems grounded in a reculturing effort that I address more fully later in this discussion. When teachers did embrace the role of teacher leader in a more public way, they encouraged others to claim the role as well, or to join them in their leadership efforts. One teacher leader who was working to create a formalized teacher leader cohort met often with union leaders and the entire staff to establish a shared understanding of teacher leadership as a collective effort toward school improvement and not an attempt to distinguish certain individuals. In order to both pursue leadership action and honor the egalitarian norms of the profession, teacher leaders need some of those leadership practices to become normalized as part of the everyday work of teaching, or at least to be shared by a wider section of their colleagues. This allows them to act as leaders and still maintain the credibility afforded by their peer status.

Motivation. Teacher leaders' position as classroom teachers not only grants them credibility with their peers, but also serves as a primary motivating force for their leadership work. Teacher leaders in this study were motivated to improve student learning, supporting findings from previous studies that emphasize the classroom and a focus on student learning as the foundation of teachers' leadership actions (Crowther & Olsen, 1997; Curtis, 2013; Donaldson, 2007; Fairman & Mackenzie, 2014; Mangin & Stoelinga, 2008, Muijs & Harris,

2006; Silva et al., 2000; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Teacher leaders in this study identify their status as classroom teachers as fundamental to their credibility as leaders and their pursuit of leadership actions as motivated by a desire to improve their teaching practices.

What distinguishes classroom teachers who lead from other formal leaders is their proximity to students. Their motivation to improve student learning is linked to improving their own teaching practices and the immediate classroom environment. The fact that the classroom is their immediate context results not only in an interest in student learning, but also an interest in their own teaching practice, a finding consistent with other research including Lieberman and Mace (2009) who conclude that lasting professional development grows from teacher learning within the classroom. Teacher leaders stress their own professional fulfillment as an important factor in why they engage in leadership activities. They are driven to engage in leadership in order to improve their teaching practice, but this desire to improve their practice is both motivated by a dedication to student learning and a desire to feel engaged in and proud of the work they do.

In addition to engaging in leadership work to improve their own sense of job satisfaction, teacher leaders are driven to do so in order to solve problems they observe in their school communities. Donaldson (2007) suggests that the teacher leader, impatient with slow-moving and formal administrative leadership turns instead to the on-the-ground changes that he can make with his colleagues and in his own classroom. This was evident in much of the teacher leadership action described by participants. Teacher leaders looked for ways that they could improve situations in their schools using the authority and access that they had, both of which are centered on the classroom. They would try new strategies, form partnerships with colleagues

around joint work, and build supportive communities that would nurture their work. These efforts indeed seem motivated by a desire to improve conditions that affect their work experience and that they perceive to be mishandled or neglected by school administrators.

These insights into the experiences of teacher leaders do much to clarify why teacher leaders take on additional, unpaid work and continue their efforts even in spite of unsupportive conditions. Teacher leaders' leadership actions are motivated not only by a desire to improve student learning but also to improve their own professional satisfaction and fulfillment within their role as a classroom teacher.

All Teachers as Leaders

Participants do not engage in leadership activities to distinguish themselves from their colleagues. Instead, they view their leadership work as an avenue toward shaping the profession to include leadership actions as part of what it means to be a teacher. Teacher leaders identified leadership actions that all teachers should engage in, emphasized that all teachers, even sometimes the most unlikely of candidates, have some strength or asset that when leveraged appropriately can serve to benefit the school and students, and expressed a deep desire to encourage their colleagues to join them in their leadership work. This stance involves reculturing the profession, a conception of teacher leadership explored by Silva et al. (2000). Further, this work can be understood as redefining participation within a community of practice, as described by Etienne Wenger (1998).

Reculturing. Perhaps the most important idea to emerge from this study is the notion of reculturing the teaching profession to include leadership action. Reculturing, or changing professional norms to include actions that are currently perceived as “above and beyond,” not only frees the teacher leader from the burden of actively working to *not* distinguish herself from

her peers, but also approaches one of the main motivating factors of teacher leaders: a desire to find more professional fulfillment in their daily roles. This conception of teacher leadership is similar to the third wave of teacher leadership suggested by Silva et al. (2000), in which teachers might meaningfully participate in school-level decision making, collaborate with other teachers, investigate problems of practice, and develop initiatives for positive change. The authors stress that this third wave requires a reculturing of schools and a more participatory leadership model. Third wave teacher leaders enable and empower their colleagues to engage in leadership actions they otherwise may not have, a description consistent with how participants in this study describe their intentions and their perceived influence. In describing her leadership actions, one teacher leader spoke about encouraging a colleague to engage in leadership action as well. She explained, “now we *together* can now influence more students and more people, more peers, more administrators, as teacher leaders together.” In this way teacher leaders seek to empower their colleagues.

Much of the leadership action described by participants demonstrates a concerted effort to shift the culture and norms of their professional communities. Peer visits and open-door policies attempt to deprivatize their practice, a crucial adjustment in the status quo (Kruse et al., 1995). The positive teacher-room talk and efforts to utilize shared planning time as collaborative learning time relayed by one teacher leader reveal an attention to attitudes and professional norms of learning. The teacher involvement in professional organizations and their efforts to share the knowledge they gain through these organizations expressed by other participants likewise serve to establish an expectation that teachers will actively work to improve their craft and expand their professional knowledge. All of these actions model a certain way of being a

teacher, a way that opens the door for teachers to be a source of leadership within their school communities.

Professional reculturing is the change that teacher leaders in this study were most interested in. Again, their leadership work is not intended to distinguish themselves from their peers, but instead to create a culture in which their peers might join them in that work. One teacher leader explained, “Teacher leadership is, I think in a school setting, it's shared leadership in the best sense, right? It's the idea that you're giving teachers a voice, you're giving them agency, you're sort of eroding the rigid structure of the school system where administrators have to be a one stop shop for everything.” This teacher leader perceives teacher leadership as one way to give teachers a voice, and meaningfully alter the leadership power inherent in the role of teacher. Silva et al. (2000) make this distinction when they describe second wave teacher leaders, who are instructionally and pedagogically focused but are still “‘apart from’ rather than ‘a part of’ teachers’ daily work” (p. 780). In contrast, the authors describe third wave teacher leaders as classroom teachers who are empowered to meaningfully participate in the school organization. In this conception of teacher leadership, leadership is a part of the daily work a teacher does on behalf of children, not separate work. Participants in this study shared this common vision, reinforcing the importance of considering the reculturing required to truly support teacher leadership.

Communities of practice. If teacher leaders are indeed working to reculture their professional communities, they are actively engaged in what Etienne Wenger (1998) describes as negotiating meaning within a community of practice. In discussing the evolution of practice within a community, Wenger explains that if a member has an experience that falls outside of the current regime of competence of a community to which they belong, that member might work to

change the community of practice itself to incorporate that new experience. An example of this would be the case of one participant who attended a professional conference, learned how to use discussion protocols to draw implications for instruction from student work samples, and then brought that knowledge back to her department. Wenger writes, “If they have enough legitimacy as members to be successful, they will have changed the regime of competence—and created new knowledge in the process” (p. 139). If the informal teacher leader spans the boundaries of multiple communities of practice, that person may facilitate interactions that both advance the joint enterprises of those communities *and* redefine the nature of participation and engagement in those communities. The teacher leader may act as a broker, creating boundary encounters and sharing boundary objects across communities. This work is not without conflict, but it is often individuals who cross or span boundaries who enact change within communities of practice. Wenger writes, “Brokers are able to make new connections across communities of practice, enable coordination, and—if they are good brokers—open new possibilities for meaning” (p.109).

This is perhaps the delicate work of the teacher leader who seeks to change the norms and culture of her school context. Teacher leaders engage in this brokering work to varying degrees: some choose to remain more comfortably positioned in communities of practice that already hold a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire in accordance with that teacher leader’s vision of her role as a professional. We see this in the example of one participant who does little to challenge norms within his school, but instead writes a blog and engages in a professional organization with like-minded peers. But other teacher leaders do engage in this active brokering work, facilitating interactions that redefine engagement in the community. This brokering work is most obvious in certain leadership actions, such as overtly advocating for changes in instructional

practices, sharing new knowledge from outside learning communities and professional organizations, and using their relationships with administrators to forge bridges across communities. But even subtle actions such as modeling professionalism in collaborative work time, inviting peers into their classrooms, and visibly trying new and innovative practices all have the potential to redefine the school community of which they are a part, or to reculture the profession as Silva et al. (2000) describe.

Implications

Findings from this study may inform efforts to encourage and cultivate teacher leadership. Implications are included for teachers, teacher leader preparation programs, school and district leaders, and policy efforts. Opportunities for further research in addition to comments about the limitations of this study are included as well.

Teachers. All teachers should consider the ways in which they are positioned for and capable of leading positive change. Teacher leaders in this study emphasized that encouraging their colleagues to engage in leadership actions was a motivating force for their work. They shared examples in which teachers who had previously not considered leadership actions or roles engaged in this work and found it to be both personally fulfilling and enriching for their school community. Their vision of teacher leadership as a source of collective capacity building should help teachers envision teacher leadership not as a role reserved for a few, but instead as a powerful source of leadership originating from the collaborative efforts of teachers. Teachers can support teacher leadership efforts in many ways, including deprivatizing their practices, teaming up with colleagues to engage in joint work, and engaging in professional learning opportunities such as joining or forming learning communities or attending workshops and actively building their professional knowledge. Teachers should further consider how they might alter the status

quo in their schools by working to improve their instructional practices within their classrooms and making this work visible to their colleagues.

Preparation programs. One key finding from this study is that teacher leaders are wary of role formalization or titles that distinguish them from their colleagues and threaten their peer status. While teacher leader preparation programs have the potential to prepare, recognize, and position teachers for leadership roles, these programs may struggle to affect change in teaching practices and student learning if role formalization acts as a roadblock to influencing change. Berg et al. (2018) suggest that programs most likely to have an impact on the quality of teaching and learning are those that prepare, recognize, and position teachers as leaders. They suggest that programs that effectively do one or two of these should consider how to incorporate all three. Award programs for instance recognize effective teacher leaders, but perhaps fail to position them in contexts where they might be able to lead and influence change. Along these lines, teacher leader preparation programs should consider how to position teacher leaders so that their credential or title will not hinder their ability to lead. This may be a matter of preparing teachers with formal teacher leadership credentials or endorsements to think about how their status could be counter normative and require intentional planning and actions to be successful. Additionally, preparation programs should consider how role formalization might influence recruitment and marketing practices, recognizing that not all teacher leaders aim for formal teacher leader roles. Programs might place an emphasis on building teachers' capacity to serve as leaders from their existing positions in the classroom.

Perhaps most importantly, teacher leader training and preparation programs alone won't be able to address the issues that surround role formalization and the finding from this study that teachers are more interested in collective capacity building than individual leadership roles.

Mangin and Stoelinga (2010) suggest that educating school leaders and preservice teachers in the power of teacher leadership as an instructional support is an essential piece of facilitating greater receptivity to the idea of teachers as a source of instructional leadership. A more comprehensive approach, involving programmatic changes to leadership programs, preservice programs and teacher leader preparation programs may better achieve the reculturing needed to facilitate teacher leadership.

School leaders and districts. School districts must be careful to maintain committed to research-based practices when developing and implementing formal teacher leader roles. This study only examined the experiences and perceptions of informal teacher leaders, but their hesitancy to distinguish themselves with a formal title should be kept in mind when considering adding formal teacher leader roles to schools and districts. An understanding of the potential drawbacks to role formalization, including the fact that formalized teacher leadership roles are sometimes less influential than informal teacher leadership (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2014; Lieberman & Friedrich, 2007; Mangin, 2005; Stoelinga, 2008), might help to mitigate unintended outcomes of the implementation of such a role. In addition, districts should consider the high degree of credibility afforded a teacher leader who serves as a classroom teacher. Teacher leaders in this study emphasized their status as a classroom teacher as essential toward maintaining credibility and influence among their peers. This should be considered when developing roles that are intended to provide instructional leadership.

School leaders would also do well to examine sources of informal leadership that are already functioning within their schools before implementing formal roles. It's likely that professional learning opportunities for staff might be best facilitated by informal teacher leaders who are already acting as a source of leadership. School leaders might find that implementing

certain conditions such as common planning time or peer observations makes particular sense considering ongoing, informal teacher leadership efforts already in place. Some specific facilitating conditions that informal teacher leaders mentioned were professional learning communities, joint work around teacher-driven initiatives, and the opportunity to visit each other's classrooms. School leaders should look for informal teacher leadership that is already occurring in their buildings and then consider the activities or structures that facilitate this work. Opening lines of communication and prioritizing a coherent vision will help ensure that formal leadership roles and informal teacher leadership are not working at cross purposes within a school district or building.

Finally, school leaders must be particularly concerned with the reculturing aspect of supporting teacher leadership. The question of whether certain professional norms are a precursor for successful teacher leadership or if teacher leadership is an avenue toward creating these norms is worth carefully considering when evaluating an implementation plan for fostering and maintaining teacher leadership. It may indeed be a little of both. In any case, incorporating teacher leadership in a meaningful way, as described by Silva et al.'s (2000) conception of the third wave of teacher leadership and participants' descriptions of changing the status quo regarding the role of the teacher, requires establishing a more participatory leadership model in which teachers can meaningfully participate in school-level decision making, collaborate with other teachers, investigate problems of practice, and develop initiatives for positive change. School leaders interested in making the most of teacher leadership must take steps to foster a shared leadership model.

Policy efforts. High stakes accountability measures threaten norms of collaboration and risk-taking, both of which participants indicated are important to encouraging more teachers to

engage in leadership actions. Even moves toward standardization of curriculum or practice might threaten the notion that teachers have diverse strengths and assets and are capable of contributing meaningfully in leadership capacities. Policy makers must keep in mind not only the potentially harmful effects of distinguishing individual teachers as teacher leaders, but also the effects of any given policy on teachers' willingness and ability to collaborate meaningfully. Participants cited relationships with colleagues and opportunities to collaborate as facilitating factors toward their leadership actions. Policies that increase competition or isolation could work counterproductively toward teacher leadership initiatives.

Limitations and Future Research. This exploratory study relied on a small sample size of ten teachers and only one form of data. This was appropriate for learning more about teacher leaders' perceptions and experiences, but did not allow for any observational data regarding teacher leaders' actions and interactions with colleagues. Further research is required to better understand the interplay between teacher leaders and their colleagues and administrators, particularly how teacher leaders build trust, the nature of their interactions with colleagues and administrators, and the influence of their efforts on teacher practice. It would be particularly useful to study multiple schools to compare the actions and influence of informal teacher leaders. Additionally, further research on hybrid teacher leader roles, in which teachers maintain some of the teaching responsibilities but also receive time allocated for leadership actions, would be useful when considering how to maintain the credibility afforded to the teacher who leads from the classroom. Questions for future research include: What leadership activities have the greatest influence on teacher practice? How do informal teacher leaders work with formal leaders? What actions do informal teacher leaders take to build trust with colleagues? How tightly is this trust

tied to peer status? What norms best support teacher leadership and how might we develop those norms?

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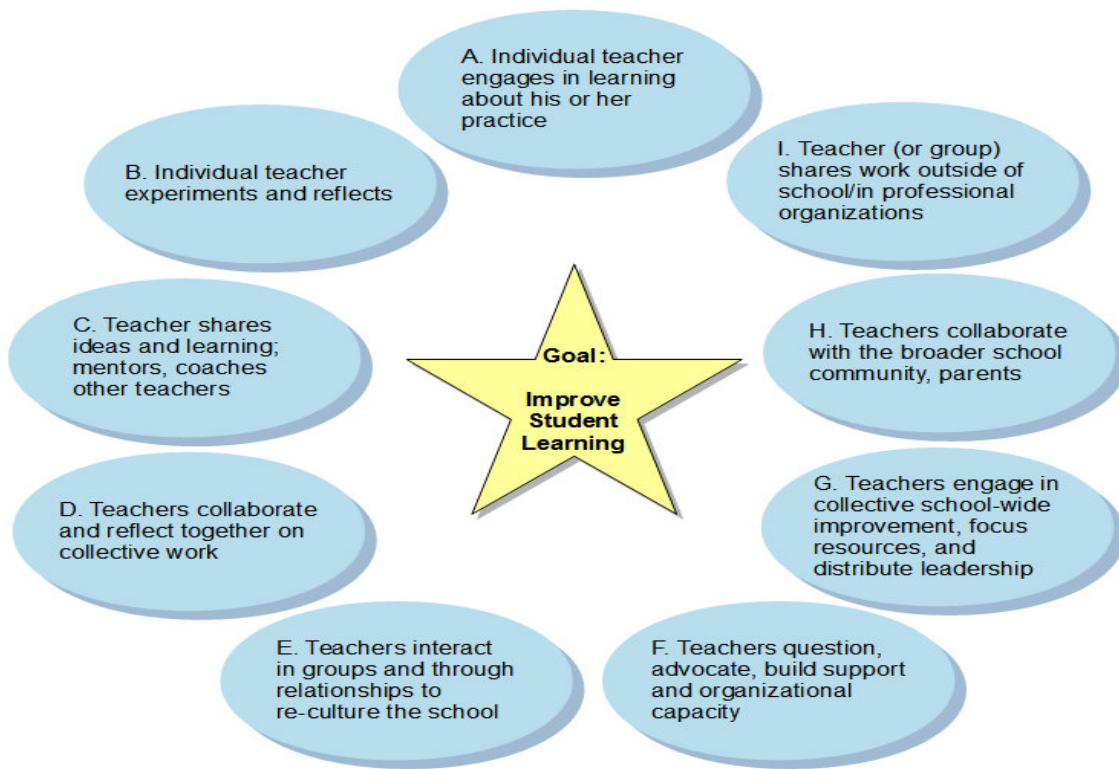
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Appendix A: Spheres of Teacher Leadership Action for Learning



(Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012)

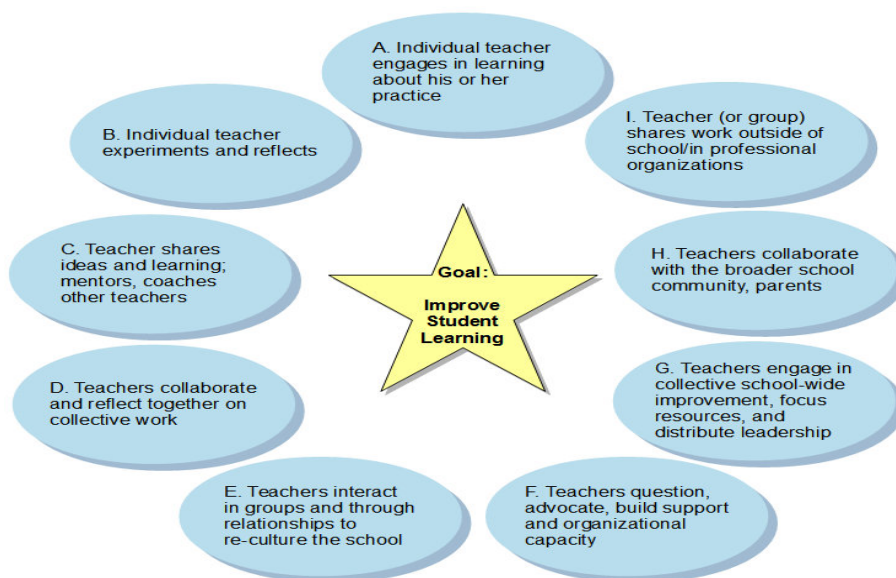
Appendix B: Identifying Teacher Leadership Actions Form

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study!

Please complete the following fields.

Name	
Job Title/Position (Include grade and subject area)	
City and State of Employment	

Please take a moment to consider the figure below. The figure represents twelve “spheres of teacher leadership action” and does a nice job articulating some of the work that teacher leaders do. After you’ve considered the various “spheres,” please answer the two questions below.



(Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012)

Please list the letter for each sphere that describes actions you have engaged in or currently engage in.		
Please choose three of these spheres and briefly provide a concrete example of your work in that area.		
1.	2.	3.
Thank you!		

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Participant Name:

Teaching assignment:

School:

Opening statement:

Thanks so much for speaking with me today. I'm interested in learning more from you about why you identify as a leader, and the work that you do as a teacher leader. The term "teacher leader" is defined in a lot of different ways by different people and in different contexts, so don't worry about whether something "counts" as teacher leadership when you're responding to my questions. It's all relevant and useful. Generally, you'll be thinking about the work you do beyond teaching your normal teaching schedule, especially work that contributes to other teachers' learning, or to benefit the school community. The more you can share with me, the more I can learn about the experiences and beliefs of teacher leaders.

Questions and probes:

1. To begin, can you state your name, and tell me what you teach and where you work?
 1. Please describe your role for me
 2. How would you explain what you do?
2. And what is your job background: have you always taught this subject and grade level?
 1. Have you worked at different schools?
 2. How long have you been teaching for?
3. Please describe your own understanding of what a teacher leader is.
4. Explain what you feel makes you a leader.
5. What makes other teachers you know leaders?
 1. What makes someone be seen as a leader in our profession?
 2. Who do you turn to for guidance? Please give an example.
6. Are there formal teacher leaders in your school, like coaches, lead teachers, or team leaders? If so, please describe your impression of that role and the leadership influence of that role.
7. Please describe some ways that you engage in leadership in your profession, either in your school or beyond.
8. Are there some leadership activities that all teachers should engage in? Why? What are these?
9. Please describe your ideal role; your ideal balance between teaching and leading.
10. Please describe that factors that support or facilitate your leadership work. Please share some examples.
 1. principal support

2. district support
 3. the climate or working relationships among teachers in the school
 4. training/professional learning
11. What factors make it challenging for you to engage in leadership? Please give examples.
1. Inter-personal relationships
 2. time
 3. leadership structures
12. Which factors are more important than others?
13. How would you describe the leadership structure at your school?
1. How is power distributed or not distributed in your school?
 2. Who has a voice, and how are different voices valued?
14. Are there norms that exist in your school, or aspects of the culture, that in any way influence your teacher leadership practice? How so?
1. focus on student learning?
 2. Focus on teachers' learning and professional development?
 3. collegial relationships?
 4. teacher leaders as valuable?
15. What do you feel is the impact or value of your leadership?
1. Where do you feel you are having the most impact? Please describe a few specific examples.
 2. Is that impact visible to others in your school?
 3. Are there things (factors?) that limit the impact you can have?
16. How does the fact that you are a classroom teacher influence your actions and impact as a leader?
17. What is your motivation to do the teacher leadership work that you do?
1. Why do you lead?
18. What motivated you initially to engage in leadership?
1. What motivates you now? Has this changed over time?
19. Are there things that reduce your motivation to engage in leadership work? Please explain, give examples.

It's been great to talk with you. Thank you so much for agreeing to talk with me today and share your experience.

Appendix D: Interview Questions and Research Questions

Literature	Research Question	Interview Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definition of teacher leadership (York-Barr & Duke, 2004) • Spheres of Teacher Leadership Action for Learning (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012) • Informal teacher leaders nurture relationships and work to build collegial environments for learning (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2014, Silva, 2000) • Teacher leaders see student learning as central to their leadership work (Crowther & Olsen, 1997; Fairman and Mackenzie, 2014; Silva et al., 2000; Wenner & Campbell, 2016). • Formal teacher leaders challenge norms of egalitarianism and seniority and are often viewed as less legitimate than informal teacher leaders (Barth, 2001; Donaldson et. al., 2008; Fairman and Mackenzie, 2014; Lieberman & Friedrich, 2007; Mangin, 2005; Stoelinga, 2008) 	<p>1. How do informal teacher leaders view the relationship between teaching and leading?</p>	<p>3. Please describe your own understanding of what a teacher leader is.</p>
		<p>4. Explain what you feel makes you a leader.</p>
		<p>5. What makes other teachers you know leaders?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What makes someone be seen as a leader in our profession? • Who do you turn to for guidance? Please give an example.
		<p>6. Are there formal teacher leaders in your school, like coaches, lead teachers, or team leaders? If so, please describe your impression of that role and the leadership influence of that role.</p>
		<p>7. Please describe some ways that you engage in leadership in your profession, either in your school or beyond.</p>
		<p>8. Are there some leadership activities that all teachers should engage in? Why? What are these?</p>
		<p>9. Please describe your ideal role; your ideal balance between teaching and leading.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher leadership is supported by: training, support from administration, climate and structural factors that allow teacher leaders to 	<p>2. What factors influence informal teacher leaders?</p>	<p>10. Please describe that factors that support or facilitate your leadership work. Please share some examples.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • principal support • district support

<p>do their work (Wenner & Campbell, 2016)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher leadership is hindered by: hierarchical leadership structures that leave teachers out of decision-making processes (Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2001), lack of time, poor relationships with peers, climate and structural factors, and personal characteristics (Wenner & Campbell, 2016). 	<p>leadership work?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the climate or working relationships among teachers in the school training/professional learning <p>11. What factors make it challenging for you to engage in leadership? Please give examples.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inter-personal relationships time leadership structures <p>12. Which factors are more important than others?</p> <p>13. How would you describe the leadership structure at your school?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How is power distributed or not distributed in your school? Who has a voice, and how are different voices valued? <p>14. Are there norms that exist in your school, or aspects of the culture, that in any way influence your teacher leadership practice? How so?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> focus on student learning? Focus on teachers' learning and professional development? collegial relationships? teacher leaders as valuable?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Often, peers resent teacher leaders who challenge egalitarian norms (Wenner & Campbell, 2016). Teacher leaders feel more professionally satisfied via their work as teacher leaders (Wenner & Campbell, 2016) Teacher leaders see student learning as central to their leadership work (Crowther & 	<p>3. How do informal teacher leaders perceive the value or impact of their work?</p>	<p>15. What do you feel is the impact or value of your leadership?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where do you feel you are having the most impact? Please describe a few specific examples. Is that impact visible to others in your school? Are there things (factors?) that limit the impact you can have?

<p>Olsen, 1997; Fairman and Mackenzie, 2014; Silva et al., 2000; Wenner & Campbell, 2016).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher leaders have a positive influence on teacher learning and sense of professionalism (Wenner & Campbell, 2016) 		<p>16. How does the fact that you are a classroom teacher influence your actions and impact as a leader?</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student learning is a major motivator for teacher leadership work (Crowther & Olsen, 1997; Fairman and Mackenzie, 2014; Silva et al., 2000; Wenner & Campbell, 2016). • Teachers want new and different challenges as their careers progress (Donaldson, 2007) • Some people thrive as “brokers,” spanning boundaries of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) 	<p>4. Why do informal teacher leaders engage in leadership?</p>	<p>17. What is your motivation to do the teacher leadership work that you do?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do you lead?
		<p>18. What motivated you initially to engage in leadership?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What motivates you now? Has this changed over time?
		<p>19. Are there things that reduce your motivation to engage in leadership work? Please explain, give examples.</p>