

Teacher Leadership: Canadian and American Perspectives

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Introduction

This issue of the *International Journal of Teacher Leadership* (IJTL) introduces for the first time a guest editor. IJTL is pleased that Professor Paul Newton, University of Saskatchewan, accepted an invitation to bring together a collection of articles by Canadian scholars about teacher leadership in Canada. Professor Newton introduces these contributions below.

Canadian Perspective

It is a great pleasure to serve as guest editor for this issue of the *International Journal of Teacher Leadership* (IJTL). My task in compiling works from Canadian scholars of teacher leadership serves as a catalyst for exploring the ways in which teacher leadership is conceptualized by an international community of scholars, and enacted across multiple jurisdictions.

One of the key questions I had at the outset of this project was to explore the extent to which there is a distinct Canadian voice in the scholarship of teacher leadership. Canadians tend to want to believe that we hold a unique perspective on research and scholarship in order to distinguish ourselves from our American neighbors. As is clear in the papers assembled here, the Canadian perspectives are not as distinctive as we might presuppose, except in their contextual framing. The other key observation is that the theoretical knowledge base for teacher leadership is in its infancy, even though as a practice and as an idea in schools, it is well established. This might be one of the (perhaps many) cases where practice has outpaced scholarship.

As a former contributor to this journal, I can attest to the fact that reviewers feel that any reference list is incomplete without a reference to York-Barr and Duke (2004), which all of our Canadian authors have referenced in their papers for this issue. This points to a situation where the number of so-called seminal works is small, and researchers hold a general consensus about the “canon” for scholarship in teacher leadership. This is somewhat unusual for educational research, and represents a level of consensus that might be problematic given that very little disruption to normative understandings about the topic has occurred. Additionally, this work entitled, *What do we Know about Teacher Leadership*, is showing its age. Definitely, there are several other seminal authors, who are also represented in the reference lists of the contributions in this issue, that hold a similar position in the pantheon of teacher leadership—Ann Lieberman, Linda Darling-Hammond, Frank Crowther, and Joseph Murphy, to name a few. There are even a few Canadian scholars who make an appearance—most notably Carol Campbell—in the papers in this issue. Although teacher leadership has made massive inroads into the worlds of policy and

practice, the literature base remains relatively homogenous and is yet theoretically under-developed (Newton, Riveros, & da Costa, 2013). There is also an emerging body of work that has engaged in a critique of the teacher leadership phenomenon in policy and practice (e.g., Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2008; Harris, 2003; Riveros, Newton & Burgess, 2017). This work brings a much-needed disruption to orthodox conceptualizations, yet has not been taken up in significant ways by those working at the center of teacher leadership research and theorizing.

This is hardly different in the Canadian context. The Canadian authors in this issue have produced excellent work; yet even in the very small community of Canadian teacher leadership scholars, the authors in this issue work in isolation from other Canadian scholars of teacher leadership. I have no explanation for this, except perhaps, in Canada, as far as I know, there is no journal, consortium, or scholarly association dedicated to the study of teacher leadership. The scholars in this journal are mostly located with a disciplinary home unit focused on educational leadership. It might be that more obvious collaborations are occurring within other sub-disciplines of education given that scholars in educational leadership tend to focus more on principal or central administrative leadership, rather than on teacher leadership. As well, the scholarship presented in this issue might be characterized as incorporating an eclectic mix of conceptual resources in making the case for teacher leadership. Most of the papers in this issue overlay theory on teacher leadership with theoretical work on professional learning communities, communities of practice, teacher collaboration, and teacher professional learning. This, again, might point to the need to more clearly define the knowledge base for teacher leadership and to work further to establish the ways in which teacher leadership intersects with, and diverges from, other theoretical constructs.

The scholarship represented in this special issue tackles the notion of teacher leadership in a multitude of ways. There is work that explores: (1) how teachers are empowered to engage in teacher leadership; (2) teacher leaders as professional development providers/facilitators; (3) teacher leadership as part of a career development process; and (4) teacher leadership within initial teacher education.

In the first paper, Sabre Cherkowski and Leyton Schnellert from the University of British Columbia report on a study that explored how teacher leadership emerges through teacher-directed, collaborative inquiry. They argue that this type of inquiry results in increased agency for teachers which, in turn, helps foster increased capacity for teacher leadership. This study echoes previous studies that suggest that teacher leadership emerges through the creation of collaborative practices for teacher led school improvement initiatives. They assert, “documenting particular stories is an important contribution to building a more comprehensive knowledge base on teacher leadership research and practice” (p. 21). This paper provides evidence of the ways in which teacher leadership can be cultivated through school improvement efforts, and reasserts the importance of exploring contexts for practice when describing the phenomenon of teacher leadership.

In the second paper, Pamela Osmond-Johnson from the University of Regina focuses on the notion of professional capital and the potential of teacher-led professional development to foster the development of teacher leadership. This argument coheres with the work of the previous authors in that it confirms the important relationship between teacher control of activity in the workplace and teacher leadership. Whereas the previous article explored teacher decision making and planning for school improvement, this paper extends the importance of teacher centered practices to include teacher-led professional learning. As Osmond-Johnson writes, “the

key for school systems appears to be the development of collaborative forms of professionalism focused on building professional capital and collective ownership over student success” (p. 39).

In the third paper, Julie Hohner and Gus Riveros from Western University report on a study in which they conceptualize teacher leadership as part of a process of career laddering. There has been some previous work in the extant literature that considers the career development of teacher leaders, but the utility of teacher leadership for school level succession planning has not been the primary focus in most of the teacher leadership literature. Hohner and Riveros argue that “participating in leadership training and leadership in both formal and informal roles opens pathways into becoming an administrator” (p. 51). While not all teacher leaders have aspirations toward formal administrative roles, the authors argue that teacher leadership presents an opportunity for the cultivation of leadership talent in schools. Additionally, Hohner and Riveros bring attention to the important considerations of context as they identify specific constraints to leadership development in rural schools.

In the final paper, Dawn Wallin, Erin DeLathouwer, Jordan Adilman, Jessie Hoffart, and Kathy Prior Hildebrandt from the University of Saskatchewan report on a study that explored the emergence of teacher leadership for peer mentors in pre-service teacher education. This study, as far as I can tell, is one of the first to conceptualize the emergence of teacher leadership as early as pre-service teacher education. Also significant in this study is the notion that teacher leadership could be developed as part of the experiences of teacher candidates in their pre-service education. This is an exciting prospect for thinking about and considering ways to develop teacher leadership. Teacher leadership is often considered to be confined to those teachers with vast teaching experience and demonstrated mastery in teaching. The framework used in this study suggests that teacher leadership is enacted through participation, professional growth, and modeling of professionalism. Put another way, the implication that teacher leaders are also experienced master teachers may be an erroneous assumption. It may also be the case that teacher leadership could be considered as multi-leveled and career stage dependent. This paper also has significant implications for teacher education programs that might want to consider whether teacher leadership ought to be central to teacher preparation.

To conclude this editorial, I would like to return to the question of whether there is a Canadian perspective on teacher leadership. It is not clear to me from my understanding of the broader literature and my reading of the papers in this issue how I might characterize a distinctly Canadian approach to thinking about teacher leadership. As mentioned previously, there is a common “core” literature upon which American and Canadian authors rely for a definitional and conceptual grounding, such as it is. Canadian scholars often rely heavily on scholarly work conducted in the United States, as our contexts for schooling compare well in many respects. In some education disciplines, there are more significant conceptual and ideological differences as a whole between American and Canadian scholars (for example, educational administration and leadership). These differences are largely due, I hypothesize, to the institutional and historical contexts for the development of disciplines in each of our countries. Most significant to these evolutionary differences is the establishment of national organizations in which scholarly conversations have developed over time that result in a national flavor to the scholarship of the discipline. At least in Canada, a similar meeting space for like-minded scholars of teacher leadership does not exist. The fact that there is little cross-pollination evident in the reference lists of our four Canadian papers in this issue is evidence of the lack of a scholarly conversation for teacher leadership scholars in Canada. Ironically, this special issue requested by our good

colleagues at IJTL in Southern California has provided a scholarly space for Canadians to “get together” and talk about our research on teacher leadership.

American Perspective

Two contributions from the southern California region conclude this issue. Both authors are new scholars to the field of teacher leadership. Their qualitative studies complement the contributions of the Canadian researchers although they focus more on the emergence of teacher leadership, in one case initiated by teachers themselves, and in the second case as a response to school administrators.

All the articles in this issue illustrate the valuable contributions that qualitative research can make to the knowledge base and theoretical underpinning of teacher leadership, but they also illustrate the persistent shortcomings of the literature pointed out by York-Barr and Duke (2004) in enabling scholars to generalize broadly about the field. Part of the reason for this situation likely stems from the fact that teacher leadership still lacks an operational definition that would enable scholars to design measures of its attributes and carry out quantitative studies that might lead to replication studies and eventually to broad generalizations about the field.

The editors at IJTL have been pondering this situation and have begun reaching out to scholars and potential guest editors for future issues that hopefully can move forward what Professor Newton calls the “canon” of scholarship in teacher leadership.

The first article, by Angela Macias, examines a bottom-up, teacher-initiated professional development approach that is free from what she believes are the constraints of the top-down “toolkit” approach by employers. The author describes a spontaneous effort by teachers to address the challenge of implementing the Common Core Standards. Beginning with 20 participants from three school districts, the effort grew in size over the next three years to include some 45 teachers, school administrators, counselors, university faculty members, high school students, parents, and community members. The scope of the events also increased, from presentations on Common Core, to college readiness, educational technology, culturally relevant instruction, and parent involvement. Macias believes that holding the events in a neutral space, such as a university, away from the school district, allowed participants to share ideas and tackle tough issues in a constraint-free environment. Macias identifies a number of new roles for teachers, administrators, and community as a result of her study.

The second article by Celia Munguia examines the critical leadership role of school administrators in fostering, incorporating, and learning from teacher leaders at the instructional level to improve the achievement of English learners. The author examines two schools with a history of high reclassification rates of English learners under the new Common Core Standards. Munguia’s purpose was to identify the systems of support used by the principals to support teachers. While the focus of this study is the role of the school principals, findings revealed that teacher leaders played a key, albeit different, role in the systems of support that principals established at their schools. While one principal readily sought out his teachers for feedback about new ideas or strategies, the other principal established a leadership team who collaboratively created a shared vision for school. Similar to Macias’s study, Munguia’s article illustrates what might be called emergent teacher leadership on the part of teachers ready to collaborate with their colleagues, administrators, and the community to promote student learning. Taken together, these two qualitative studies illustrate different ways teacher leadership can emerge and develop.

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