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Preservice Elementary Education Graduate Students' Perception of Teacher Leadership

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This qualitative study was designed to discern how preservice Elementary Education graduate students perceived the concept of teacher leadership and how this idea was fostered in their coursework. Through course document analysis and in-depth interviews with nine graduate students undergoing initial licensure, data was collected and triangulated to provide a rich and descriptive analysis of the participants' experiences and perceptions as they related to teacher leadership in their preservice program. Using case study and cross cases analysis, major themes related to teacher leadership emerged. The participants largely focused on student/classroom-centered views of teacher leadership and lacked the whole-school perspective cited in college documents and in the literature. Participants also had a difficult time explaining how teacher leadership was being fostered in their coursework, highlighting a disparity between the working definition of teacher leadership employed by the college and noted in the literature, and the students' understanding of the concept.

Focus of Inquiry

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 required schools to focus greater attention on the academic achievement of all students. As a result, the work of school leaders has become more complex. Traditional school leaders are increasingly expected to perform a variety of roles which are often accompanied by unique and cumbersome responsibilities.

Accordingly, traditional educational leadership, marked by formal postings as principals and assistant principals, is evolving. Many educators are embracing a newer understanding of what is needed from leadership for schools to be effective in the 21st century. The notion of distributed leadership through teacher leaders is gaining acceptance as educators understand what is meant by the term teacher leader, how it is operationalized, and the role that teacher leaders play in the effectiveness of schools (Harris & Muijs, 2003). Because teacher leaders can be an important component of overall school effectiveness, universities are incorporating the concept into their curricula for preservice teachers. This study sought to determine how the concept of teacher leadership was portrayed to preservice teachers as they worked to become certified. Two research questions guided the study: (1) How do current preservice Elementary Education graduate students perceive the term "teacher leadership?" and (2) In what ways is it fostered in their coursework?

Review of the Literature

While much has been written about teacher leadership, the definition of the term is rather elusive. York-Barr and Duke (2004) conducted a literature review of over 140 sources pertaining to teacher leadership and found that "the concept of teacher leadership has not been clearly or consistently defined" (p. 263). Over the years, teacher leadership has been talked about in various contexts including teachers that serve in formal roles, teachers as instructional experts, and teachers as central players in creating school culture, but there is no agreement on an actual definition of the term.

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Teacher Leadership Defined

After reflecting on the literature, York-Barr and Duke (2004) offered their own definition of teacher leadership as "the process by which teachers, individually or collectively influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement" (p. 287-288). In their extensive literature review of teacher leaders, Harris and Muijs (2003) noted the "indirect but powerful" influence that teacher leaders exert on leadership and decision-making within the school (p. 1). Additionally, they noted that "a central role of teacher leaders is one of helping colleagues to try out new ideas and to encourage them to adopt leadership roles" (p. 6). Phelps (2008) described teacher leaders as having certain knowledge, skills, and dispositions which can be developed at both the preservice and in-service levels. Her teacher leadership model includes the following attributes:

- knowledge - change (process and principles), school culture, reform recommendations, servant leadership;
- skills - advocacy, empathy, questioning, vision creating, collaborating, networking; and
- dispositions - risk taking and persistence, challenge, service, efficacy, resiliency (p. 121).

Anderson (2008) stated that when teacher leaders were asked to characterize qualities that contribute to leadership, they describe teacher leaders as "confident, determined, outspoken, and knowledgeable" (p. 15). Harris (2002) delineated four dimensions in the role of teacher leader:

- brokering - translation of principles of school improvement into the practices of individual classrooms;
- participative leadership - where all teachers feel part of the change or development and have a sense of ownership;
- mediating role - whereby teacher leaders are important sources of expertise and information and are able to draw critically upon additional resources and expertise if required and to seek external assistance; and
- relationship building - forging close relationships with individual teachers through which mutual learning takes place (p. 2-3).

York-Barr and Duke (2004) offered several dimensions of teacher leadership practices: they serve as educators for preservice teachers as well as their own colleagues, work with parents and the community, act as change agents for school improvement, participate in professional organizations, work with curriculum at the school and district level, and participate in various coordination and management roles.

Scholars studying teacher leaders consistently indicate that teacher leaders are first and foremost expert teachers who are respected by their colleagues (Anderson, 2008; Harris, 2002; Phelps, 2008). Teacher leaders extend their influence beyond their individual classrooms to the larger community of the school or the district (Phelps, 2008). Rather than teach in isolation, York-Barr and Duke (2004) noted that teacher leaders seek opportunities to interact with other colleagues to develop their own skills as they help to develop and strengthen the skills of those around them. In concert with this idea, several studies (Harris & Muijs, 2003; Phelps, 2008; York-Barr & Duke, 2004) note that collegiality and collaboration are critical elements of teacher leader practices.

Teacher Leadership Operationalized

Though some scholars tend to focus on the goals or outcomes of teacher leaders, others have begun to operationalize the actions exhibited by teacher leaders. Cherubini (2007) found that even beginning teachers were able to recognize teacher leadership when they saw it in action. Gehrke (1991) noted the functions of teacher leaders:

- continuously improving their own classroom teaching;
- organizing and leading reviews of school practice;
- providing curriculum development knowledge;
- participating in in-school decision making;
- giving in-service training to colleagues; and

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- participating in the performance evaluation of teachers (p. 3-4).

Similarly, Harris and Muijs (2003) stated that a review of the literature identified six activities of teacher leaders. These are:

- continuing to teach and to improve individual teaching proficiency and skill;
- organizing and leading peer reviews of teaching practices;
- providing curriculum development knowledge;
- participating in school level decision making;
- leading in-service training and staff development activities; and
- engaging other teachers in collaborative action planning, reflection, and research.

To effectively utilize teachers in their new role, Firestone and Martinez (2007) identified three main areas where districts can share leadership responsibilities with teacher leaders: providing materials, monitoring, and developing people (coaching). Coaching proved to be the most effective, but required administrators to give teacher leaders time to perform this role. Monitoring was the least effective because teachers began to distrust their colleagues who were granted the authority to oversee their professional practice.

Clear commonalities from the literature emerge with the operationalization of teacher leaders. Several studies (Harris & Muijs, 2003; Gehrke, 1991) note that teacher leaders consistently strive to improve their teaching craft. Teacher leaders willingly take on additional tasks and responsibilities that are not required of classroom teachers that benefit the school and other teachers within it. These tasks include conducting professional development through in-service training to colleagues, staff development, and coaching (Firestone & Martinez, 2007; Gehrke, 1991; Harris & Muijs, 2003). Finally, participating in school-level decision-making is yet another characteristic of teacher leaders' acquired duties (Gehrke, 1991; Harris & Muijs, 2003).

Teacher Leadership Preparation in Preservice Teachers

York-Barr and Duke (2004) found that there has been very little empirical work done in the area of preparation of teacher leaders. However, they pointed out that several types of teacher leadership training exist including internal training within districts and individual schools. They also mentioned professional development school partnerships between educational institutions and school districts to help train preservice and in-service teachers. Similarly, Sherrill (1999) talked about partnerships between school divisions and universities where teacher leaders work with university teacher preparation programs. Although these educators do not necessarily talk about the concept of teacher leadership per se, they do foster its development in preservice teachers by modeling some of its key attributes such as:

demonstrating expert classroom instruction and sound knowledge of effective teaching and learning strategies, facilitating conferences with preservice teachers in a differentiated and reciprocal manner, analyzing approaches to their work via adult learning theory, and providing feedback tied to theory and research (p. 58).

As part of a national effort to elucidate school leadership issues and to bring them into the public's focus, the Institute of Educational Leadership (2001) formed a task force to look specifically at ways to improve teacher leadership within the classroom, school, and larger policy arena. They found that "the professionalism (and the beginning of a consciousness about the teacher as a leader) should be a core feature of teacher training is not easily acquired" in part, because the tuition paid for education programs often goes to more expensive programs within the institution such as law, engineering, medicine, and nursing. In fact, one task force member noted that only about half of the money a teacher pays in tuition actually comes back in the form of teacher preparation (p. 11). They also found that very few schools go into enough depth in management and leadership training for their future teachers. They noted that preservice teachers need to be exposed to the broader policy issues of education as well as contemporary issues such as the political, societal, and cultural issues that impact education so that they will be better equipped to assume leadership roles.

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The concept that teachers can be school leaders is well researched (Firestone & Martinez, 2007; Gehrke, 1991; Harris & Muijs, 2003; Phelps, 2008; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). As previously noted, however, teacher leadership is a concept that is difficult to define. Teachers may assume formal leadership roles, such as coaches or department chairs, but may lack the authority to implement meaningful change. Further, given that authority, the trust that is necessary for effective leadership may erode (Firestone & Martinez, 2007). Accordingly, it is not likely that colleges and universities that prepare teachers exert a great amount of resources on promoting all of the components that help develop teacher leaders. Instead, teacher preparation programs generally focus on subject matter expertise and pedagogy—the methods and strategies preservice teachers will use to deliver content to influence their students. Although engaging students is the central work of teachers, that work can be enhanced by an awareness of the power of collegiality. Practicing teachers develop an understanding of their work through their own experiences and through the shared experiences of colleagues. Teacher leadership assumes that teachers have the ability to constructively influence the professional practice of their colleagues (Harris & Muijs, 2003; Phelps, 2008; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). If teachers in the field are to engage in teacher leadership practices, then these practices must be learned in professional training. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to build an understanding of the term teacher leadership based on the experiences and perceptions of preservice teachers training to enter the field.

Methodology

Through in-depth interviews and course document analysis, data was collected and triangulated to provide a rich and descriptive analysis of the participants' experiences and perceptions as they related to teacher leadership in their preservice program. Nine interviews were conducted to allow the exploration of how the concept of teacher leadership had been constructed during each participant's graduate coursework. The study of this phenomenon helped the researchers and the participants build a new meaning of what a teacher leader is for preservice teachers.

Research Sample

This study took place at a School of Education at a medium-sized public college in the southeastern United States. Using criterion sampling, nine volunteer graduate students undergoing initial licensure were selected. The study focused on the Elementary Education cohort because they had already been in the program for several months and had experienced coursework, but they were not yet student teaching. To keep the sample as homogeneous as possible, master's students who had earned an undergraduate degree within the past year were selected to limit the influence of previous work experience. The term "teacher leadership" was not used when explaining the study to eliminate the possibility that the students would research what was meant by the term prior to the interview

All of the volunteers for the study were female. Of the 17 volunteers, ten were 2008 graduates. One prospective participant used a potentially traceable pseudonym on her data sheet, leaving the research team with the nine viable volunteers. All of the participants graduated from east coast state colleges or universities and were in their early- to mid-twenties. Their college majors ranged from biology (N = 1), political science (N = 1), history (N = 2), psychology (N = 2), to interdisciplinary studies (N = 3). One was a psychology minor and another, a music minor. All nine volunteers planned to graduate from the program with a master's degree and their teaching certification in 2009.

Data Generation/Collection

Each of the three researchers conducted a separate one-hour interview of three students for a total of nine interview hours using an interview guide that included standardized open-ended questions. The initial questions focused on the students' thoughts about leadership in general and later questions pertained specifically to teacher leadership. The interview guide provided the flexibility to respond to the subjects more readily and to craft appropriate follow-up questions about any general ideas that the

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subjects did not mention. By using this mixed approach, a non-threatening atmosphere was created where subjects were encouraged to elaborate on their thoughts. Throughout the interview, the researchers checked and asked clarifying questions as needed.

Approximately one week after the interview, the researchers queried the interview participants via email about their thoughts on teacher leadership. The participants were specifically asked whether they had any additional thoughts on teacher leadership and how it was being fostered in their coursework after having time to reflect on the topic. This follow-up was important because some of the participants were not as familiar with the concept of teacher leadership as others were prior to the interview and might have consequently further conceptualized their definition of the term after reflecting on the interview. Because the interview made them more aware of the idea of teacher leadership, they may have been more focused on looking at ways in which it was fostered in the program. This email query provided them the opportunity to talk about any changes in their observations or opinions since the interview.

The researchers also collected two presentations a faculty member had presented about teacher leaders and the student teaching handbook. Additional material culture included the syllabi from Language Arts Methods, Math Methods, Science Methods, Social Studies Methods, and Technology which allowed the researchers to gain a better understanding of the material to which the students had been exposed. These items also provided the researchers with a general idea of how the institution and its faculty perceived teacher leadership and how they fostered it in coursework. This information was used to assist the researchers in creating interview questions that were relevant to the students' experiences within the program.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and then subjected to thematic analysis. This involved "coding and then segregating the data by codes into data clumps for further analysis and description" (Glesne, 2006, p. 147). The constant comparative method was used for analysis (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993) which provided a thick description. Rossman and Rallis (2003) pointed out that "thick description makes analysis and interpretation possible" (p. 275). Once the initial coding was complete, the researchers looked at the categories to see if there were any relationships between them. By looking at the links between categories, a more complete explanation evolved of the way the students perceived teacher leadership.

In contrast, holistic coding was employed to analyze the material culture. Because syllabi and presentations were used to assist with interview questions, the researchers were able to look at the data from a somewhat broader approach (Rossman & Rollis, 2003). Common codes were created to develop broader categories and overall themes and were used to help identify how the institution defined teacher leadership. In addition, reflexive journals assisted in capturing the researchers' thoughts as the study progressed. The data was categorized and organized by using graphic displays and tables. This collective data helped explain consistencies and inconsistencies in teacher leadership perceptions between the participants and the institution.

Trustworthiness and Authenticity. To increase trustworthiness, the researchers employed triangulation and shared emergent findings with participants. However, because the data was being collected in a brief time period and from only one cohort of students, there may be issues that limit the transferability and dependability of the study's findings (Glesne, 2006). However, these findings do add to the body of knowledge about how students perceive the concept of teacher leadership.

To address credibility and confirmability, the researchers employed interviews and document collection as methods of data collection. Further, member checks were used during data collection to ensure that participants were able to elaborate their responses and provide greater depth of understanding for the researchers. Initial interpretations were sent to the participants to verify that that those interpretations were accurate. Seven of nine participants responded to this verification procedure. Most responded that the interview summaries provided to them accurately reflected their views. Where changes

were suggested, they tended to be matters of minor detail—the specific title of a teacher to whom they referred in the interview, or clarification of wording. No changes were made that affected the results of the study. Peer debriefing also added to the study's credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To address the issues of transferability and dependability, each researcher maintained a journal.

Results

After thorough review and careful consideration of reporting options, the researchers chose to use case study and cross case analysis as the appropriate vehicles to best convey participant meaning. Thick description and detailed in-depth reporting of each participant's views are a natural extension of this approach. Looking to "understand a larger phenomenon through intensive examination of one specific instance" (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 104), case study was the approach of choice.

Analysis revealed central categories and themes specific to individuals and across participants. The emergent themes are discussed by category in a cross case analysis. Specifically, these categories refer to preservice teachers' perceptions of the qualities of teacher leaders and include collaborative spirit, collegiality, instructional and content expertise, flexibility, and fostering teacher leadership.

Cross-Case Analysis

We will be noting similarities and differences between the participants within each of these categories.

Collaborative Spirit. Eight of nine participants noted the connection between collaboration and teacher leadership. Collaboration was viewed as a way to strengthen teaching skills and as a vehicle for furthering understanding of classroom students and their parents. Being able to collaborate effectively with other teachers was noted time and time again by our participants. Mary quickly commented that teacher leaders routinely collaborate with one another and seek opportunities to do so at the school or district level. Mary's first response to the question about how teacher leaders are defined focused on sharing information with other teachers outside the classroom. She made the connection between teacher leaders and collaboration from the outset. "I think a teacher leader,… take their classroom experiences and they share it with others; whether that's developing curriculum or creating new programs in the school." When asked to elaborate, she said, "It has a lot to do with collaboration with others." But Mary made a distinction between teachers and teacher leaders as collaborators when she added that teacher leader collaborators had an additional quality of having the ability of bringing people together. She saw these teachers as the impetus behind the collaborative effort thus "leading" it.

Both Ella and Sarah Jane also realized the importance of collaborative planning and cooperative work in bettering their abilities as teachers and teacher leaders. One of the first descriptions that came to Sarah Jane's mind when asked about leadership qualities was "collaborative." She said, "A good leader would need to be able to work together with other people. Sometimes be[ing] the leader and sometimes be[ing] the follower makes a good leader I think." Sarah Jane realized that collaborative work requires roles that shift as needs change, and that an effective teacher leader knows when these shifts need to occur. This natural ebb and flow of differing responsibilities and roles helps to make collaboration seamless. Ella, in particular, voiced her thoughts about the benefits of working with others to better understand students and their parents. She viewed collaboration as a time for seeking advice and solidifying beliefs. Ella described teacher leaders as those who routinely seek opportunities to work with others and are open to the ideas of others in a nonjudgmental way. She explained that teacher leaders perceive opportunities for collaboration as positive and enriching rather than as laborious and something they are duty bound to carry out. To Ella, collaboration offered a level of support and sharing that is comforting and reassuring.

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Okay, simply just brainstorming ideas, teaching at least for me, talking out loud and getting ideas from other teachers . . . sometimes it's hard to think of eight creative things to do a day so if you can rely on your other colleagues to help you come up with ideas or also if you have questions, if you're not sure what to do in a situation with a kid or with parents or with another colleague, you can depend on them to give you advice.

Ella continued in this vein saying that "networking" with other teachers and "working on plans together" are examples of collaborative efforts rather than "always kind of keeping to yourself." She saw this routinely among grade level members at the school where she recently completed her practicum work and likened these examples to the "first opportunity" to demonstrate leadership skills.

Andrea realized that teacher leaders want to better not only themselves, but the larger school community which, in turn, benefits the students. She viewed teacher leaders as those who help others to become more effective teachers saying, "I think that you would have to be able to relate not only [to] students, but to parents and other teachers because part of being a teacher leader is helping other teachers become effective teachers." Emily shared this view as well. When Lucy spoke of teacher leadership as it relates to collaborative spirit, she often referred to her practicum teacher as someone who is viewed as a teacher leader because she actively participates in decision-making and has a voice in school affairs. According to Lucy, participation on school committees was one way that teachers could display leadership. She further stated that teacher leaders are those who participate in meetings and events that are not required and teacher leaders are those who find and share resources with other teachers.

Peggy Sue noted that communication and cooperative work with other teachers were keys to the effective collaboration efforts of teacher leaders. She furthered her thoughts when she connected group work and networking as a way to build relationships that could prove helpful in future efforts. She specifically pointed out the value of group work, saying that

… anything that involves communication with other people I think will help develop those skills because you have to learn these skills in order to cooperate well with others. So I guess group work would be a really good way to develop leadership skills.

Anneliese was much more classroom and student-centered rather than collaborative. She spoke of "sharing" ideas with other teachers as a way of furthering her understanding of her students or the subject matter she taught. Austin Miles, however, did not specifically address collaborative practices in her discussions of teacher leadership. Rather, she focused more on teacher leaders as those who were "assigned" to the role and the duties that assignment entailed. Overall, the participants perceived teacher leaders as those interested in continuously becoming better at teaching and bettering their understanding of their students and parents. Collaboration was viewed as a critical way in which to strengthen each of these areas.

Collegiality. Collegiality emerged as a common thread in the effort to understand and construct a meaning of teacher leadership. Based on the information garnered from interviews with the participants and the subsequent coding of those interviews, it was determined that collegiality could be loosely described as *how teacher leaders interact with other educators*. In this regard, participant interviews yielded three major elements of collegiality: building relationships, giving advice to other teachers, and having good communication skills; and three lesser elements: approachability, sharing materials, and working with parents.

Building relationships was the first major element of collegiality and was identified by four of the nine participants—Ella, Mary, Peggy Sue, and Lucy. Each noted that teacher leaders need to be able to work with other teachers. Similarly, four participants stated that teacher leaders are those whom other teachers turn to for advice or help. Sara Jane suggested that teacher leaders have earned the respect of their colleagues, and are sought out when assistance is needed and viewed her cooperating teacher as a teacher leader. As Sara Jane related, "So they obviously respect her opinion if they're coming in and asking her for help all the time." This frequency of visitation suggests collegiality between the teachers; a

comfort level that allows for exchange of ideas and advice. Sarah Jane further explained that all the other kindergarten teachers come and ask her for advice.

> They ask her for materials, they know she has a lot of books like reading books, *Words their Way*, you know a big thing for kindergarten, and a lot of them are always coming into her class [asking], "can I borrow your book," "can I borrow this," and it's all her personal things that she chose to invest in.

This made a big impression on Sarah Jane who stated later in the interview that she wanted to be one of "those teachers that others come to." She viewed this advice giving strength as a positive aspect of teacher leadership.

> Mary saw teacher leaders as role models whom others turn to for guidance. "I guess a teacher leader would be when people come to them. They see them as either a role model or somebody has the experience you know to go and ask them for help or guidance." These are teachers who are respected among their peers and are sought out for advice or emulation. "Others view their teaching style as effective, as something they would like to copy, um, imitate."

> Anneliese and Emily stated that other teachers use teacher leaders as a support system when there is a problem in the classroom. Emily responded that a teacher leader is:

> A good colleague to work with; one that you know you can always go to for help and can be your support system. They can help you get materials to use in the classroom. If there's a situation in the classroom that you don't know how to handle, they could offer some advice based on their experience.

The third major element of collegiality identified by four participants was good communication skills. Peggy Sue mentioned that misunderstandings will inevitably exist among a school's faculty. Teacher leaders must possess strong communication skills so that they can see through the misunderstandings and restate concepts and issues so that everyone hears the intended message. She stated,

> I do think that a teacher leader also has to have the ability to break things down, not just like the concepts and things they would be teaching, but also any kind of misunderstandings that are going on, you can't just restate things to fix them . . . when you're working with other teachers. You have to be able to . . . there's faculty meetings and whatnot where things are discussed. . . . Those communication skills really need to come in right then because you can say one thing and everyone hears something else, and you have to be able to explain them in a different manner so that things are . . . you don't let them criss-cross.

Austin Miles added that teacher leaders need to be able to diffuse divisive situations among faculty members. Lucy stated that a teacher leader is someone who "gets to know the other teachers [and] takes interest in other teachers." Both Emily and Lucy further stated that teacher leaders must be able to consider all sides of a situation and take an interest in other teachers.

> The three lesser elements of collegiality that emerged were each reported by at least two participants. Providing and sharing materials was mentioned by Sara Jane and Emily. Peggy Sue and Lucy suggested that collegiality extended beyond interactions with other educators and included relationships with parents. Ella, Sara Jane, and Andrea agreed that approachability was an important part of teacher leadership. Ella described a teacher leader as nonjudgmental. She and Sara Jane both stated that teacher leaders establish a comfortable environment in which other teachers could feel safe frequently asking for assistance.

> When defining teacher leadership, the participants acknowledged that effective leadership requires the ability to build and maintain interpersonal relationships with both colleagues and parents. These relationships provide the foundation for the sharing of professional insight, knowledge, and materials that all contribute to teacher leadership. The participants suggested that teacher leaders must possess both the ability and the willingness to help others. Collegiality is the construct that enables teacher leaders to carry out this function.

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Instructional and Content Expertise. Instructional and content expertise was viewed as a desirable, but not critical component of teacher leaders by the study participants. Five of the subjects implied that expertise was important, although they expressed this in different ways. Both Sarah Jane and Mary considered such expertise to be a prerequisite for being a teacher leader, using such phrases as "she's on top of her game," and "specialized knowledge." Andrea explained that teacher leaders:

>Look for new ways to teach their students and are always looking for more ways to make their teaching more effective. So, you're ahead of the pack . . . you're the one who's out there looking for these innovative ways to do things rather than just doing things the way you've been doing them for years, or the way that everyone else does them, or the way the book tells you to do them.

Anneliese placed an emphasis on the importance of a teacher leader having instructional and content expertise. She pointed out that a teacher leader "makes it a priority" to improve their expertise in both their subject matter and on teaching-related issues. She felt that subject matter and pedagogy could be improved "by going to conferences, talking to other teachers, reading research, those types of things, and trying new things in their classroom, not being afraid to do that." Peggy Sue, however, only went so far as to say that a teacher leader needs to fully understand and be able to explain the concepts she teaches. Anneliese, Austin Miles, Sarah Jane, and Emily all pointed out that attending conferences could be helpful by improving a teacher's knowledge. Anneliese added that content and pedagogy could also be improved via research, discussions with other teachers, and trying new things.

On the other hand, Austin Miles, Ella, Emily, and Lucy did not specifically mention instructional or content expertise as being important factors in becoming teacher leaders. Instead, they focused on the broader idea of a teacher leader having more of a human relations expertise. Austin Miles focused more on the idea of teacher leaders providing individualized instruction and looking out for their students. Emily, too, talked about teacher leaders helping students reach their goals and acting as mentors. Similarly, Emily and Peggy Sue both pointed out examples of teacher leaders who treated their students as individuals. Lucy mentioned that teacher leaders needed to focus on students' instructional gaps.

Overall, the participants concluded that expertise is fundamental to teacher leadership, but the areas in which it is demonstrated may differ. Some teacher leaders are content experts, some have superb pedagogical skills, and still others are experts at human relations. Despite these differences, teacher leaders have the common thread of using their expertise to help their students.

Flexibility. The majority of participants highlighted flexibility as being an important quality of teacher leaders. They believed that flexibility is manifested not only in being open to innovative ideas, but also in putting these ideas into action. Ella, Anneliese, and Andrea specifically used the word "flexibility." Andrea elaborated on flexibility, pointing out that flexibility was one of the most important qualities of a teacher leader stating,

>I think it's always important to be conscious of what's best for your students, what's going to fit best with the curriculum, and with the certain group of abilities that you have. I guess a teacher leader is really concerned with those things. It's more that just "I'm the teacher and this is the way I teach." It's more like your biggest concern is learning and that's what drives your teaching. You're very flexible; I think you have to be in order to be the most effective.

She believed that her ability to be flexible will benefit her students and that is why it is an important component of teacher leadership.

Anneliese thought that a teacher leader "likes to try new things." Similarly, Mary said teacher leaders were "open to new ideas" and Sarah Jane talked about teacher leaders being innovative risk takers and thinking outside the box. Peggy Sue had very similar comments. She talked about "stepping outside" and "being able to take the initiative" as ways of showing flexibility. Lucy alluded to flexibility in her comments about the importance of teacher leaders being able to give up control of certain tasks. Their willingness to delegate showed flexibility in the way they accomplished their work.

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As part of flexibility, two of the participants thought that the ability to change was also a hallmark of a teacher leader. Sarah Jane pointed out that teacher leaders are not afraid to make changes while Ella explained that being willing to make a change even when unpopular was important. Although not specifying teacher leaders, Austin Miles indicated that leaders in general "needed to be able to change."

On the other hand Emily thought of flexibility as more of a balancing act. She talked about a teacher leader as "someone who can balance the politics of education." A teacher's ability to balance the sometimes competing interests of the students, teachers, administrators, and the community shows flexibility in dealing with "the swinging pendulum of education."

Overall, the majority of participants perceived the ability of teachers to be flexible as an important component of leadership. Teachers demonstrate their flexibility in many ways such as thinking and acting innovatively, taking the initiative, being willing and able to change, and balancing the interests of different groups.

Fostering Teacher Leadership. When asked how teacher leadership was being fostered in their graduate coursework, participants most commonly responded that they had difficulty thinking of concrete examples. Five of nine participants stated explicitly that it was difficult thinking of specific ways that their coursework was preparing them to be teacher leaders. Additionally, five of nine participants stated that teacher leadership was either not directly taught in their coursework or was rarely mentioned. Anneliese pointed out that teacher leadership is not a concept that is easily taught. She stated, "Teacher leadership, I feel, is kind of something, it's something difficult, to be able to effectively say this is what we're going to do today, we're going to work on teacher leadership. Kind of weird." Two participants, Ella and Lucy, stated that teacher leadership was not directly addressed, whereas, Sara Jane, Mary, Austin Miles, and Lucy stated that it was rarely mentioned. Therefore, the findings indicate that only four of nine participants were comfortably able to discuss the ways in which teacher leadership was being fostered in their coursework.

Anneliese reported that students in the program had the opportunity to share knowledge with one another and to attend conferences. Sara Jane reported similar opportunities in the program and agreed that these were activities designed to build leadership. Mary also stated that she had the opportunity to share knowledge with her peers in the program and that was evidence of fostering teacher leadership. Accordingly, three of nine participants responded that sharing knowledge and attending conferences were ways in which teacher leadership was being fostered in their graduate coursework. In addition to attending conferences, two participants stated that they have joined professional organizations as part of their coursework. Sarah Jane suggested that her membership in a professional organization was more to fulfill a course requirement than to develop leadership.

Peggy Sue, Emily, and Andrea stated that teacher leadership was being developed in their coursework because they were required to complete group assignments. Andrea suggested that these assignments offered students the opportunity to increase their own knowledge by sharing ideas and participating with others in class. She also concluded that leadership qualities may be acquired through experiences. Additionally, Andrea stated that teacher leadership was fostered in her coursework because the professors required students to teach lessons; a viewpoint also noted by another participant. Peggy Sue related group assignments to the important leadership skills of communication and collaboration. Peggy Sue and Emily stated that students in the program had to take the initiative to schedule observation times for social studies classes. Both agreed that initiative is an important element of leadership development.

Two other examples of teacher leadership being fostered in coursework emerged from the participants' interviews. Each of these examples was reported by only one person. Lucy stated that students were encouraged by professors to try new things in their classroom. She believed that an element of teacher leadership is the willingness to implement effective practices in the classroom even in the face of peer or administrative resistance. She also reported that students in the program read a book and spent

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time discussing how to forge effective relationships with parents. She viewed this as an opportunity to develop teacher leadership.

      Overall, participants had difficulty communicating ways that teacher leadership was being fostered in their coursework. This was exacerbated by the fact that there was little continuity in the definitions of teacher leadership that participants provided across the interviews. Although some specific course assignments recurred as examples of leadership training (a technology module, researching a particular topic and sharing with peers, and so forth), several of the participants explicitly stated that those examples were limited to one or two particular classes. The examples of fostering teacher leadership that did emerge in the study focused on students having the opportunity to share knowledge, attend professional conferences, and participate in group assignments. However, most participants agreed that teacher leadership was either a minor factor in their courses or was left out all together.

Synthesis of Findings

      A synthesis of our participants' views suggests that teacher leaders share knowledge and materials with colleagues, build relationships with peers and parents, know their subject matter, and seek ways to improve their teaching. Teacher leaders work with others in their school to improve the practice of all teachers. To achieve this, they must possess communication skills that enable them to effectively relate to a faculty with potentially diverse interests and needs. Good listening skills are an essential component of the teacher leader's qualities. Teacher leaders must also have command of the material that they teach and desire to continuously find ways to communicate that material to students. Teacher leaders do not get addicted to a single teaching style. They are flexible enough to allow student needs to inform lesson design.

      Participants in our study indicated that their coursework afforded them opportunities to engage in activities that foster some of the aforementioned qualities and dispositions of teacher leaders. Most commonly, participants reported that working in groups enabled them to share knowledge with one another. Participating in group assignments emerged as the primary way that participants viewed teacher leadership being fostered in their coursework. One participant suggested that students be allowed more opportunities to take part in these activities. Aside from working in groups, most participants were unable to connect their graduate training to the themes of teacher leadership that emerged in the study (collaborative spirit, collegiality, instructional and content expertise, and flexibility). A few of the participants, however, acknowledged that these elements may be addressed in future courses.

Discussion

      One of the two research questions we posed is: How do current preservice Elementary Education graduate students perceive the term "teacher leadership? Upon reflection, it became apparent that in a number of ways our participants' views of teacher leadership varied from those of the research literature and those of the School of Education. The literature addressed teacher leadership from two aspects: teacher leader defined and teacher leader operationalized. Table 1 illustrates these differences.

      Comparing the research literature with the School of Education, it quickly becomes apparent both are similar as they define teacher leaders. In addition to collaboration, collegiality, and content and instructional expertise, both note the existence of a whole school perspective and the empowerment of teacher leaders outside the classroom. Understood is the notion that teacher leadership implies relationships to the larger context of the school and beyond. However, this is in stark contrast to participants' views. By and large they tended to focus on a classroom-centered model of teacher leadership. Though three of the nine participants spoke of teacher leaders being influential in the larger school community this was missing from the others in describing teacher leadership qualities. Perhaps, given the focus of preservice teachers' in their coursework, this should come as no surprise. Coursework, by and large, concerns methods and management classes. Logically, they would place their emphasis on where they will be spending the bulk of their time as novice teachers and on what they have experienced

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in their educational training—in the classroom. The participants did not convey a whole school perspective when it came to defining teacher leadership qualities shows a disparity between what is known in the educational field and in educational literature and what is reflected by these preservice teachers.

Table 1
A Comparison of the Literature, the Participants, and the School of Education

	Teacher Leader Defined	Teacher Leader Operationalized
Literature	- Seeks opportunities to interact with others for improvement purposes - Collegiality - Collaboration - Expert teacher - Content expert - Instructional expert - Curriculum development expertise - Empowered in and outside classroom - Whole school perspective - Influential	- Continuous improvement of teaching craft (participates in conferences, training, creating curriculum) - Willingly takes on tasks outside classroom (conducts professional development, in-service training, mentoring, coaching) - Participates in school-level decision-making
Participants	- Collaboration - Collegiality - Expert teacher - Content expert - Instructional expert	- Mentor - Tutor - Supports students - Builds relationships with students - Instructional focus
School of Education	- Basic organizational knowledge - Reflective practitioner - Content expert - Collegial - Collaborative - Professional knowledge and skills - Empowered - Professionalism - Whole school perspective - Worthy of honor - Exclusive to experienced teachers	- Continuous improvement of teaching craft (participates in conferences, training, creating curriculum) - Willingly takes on tasks outside classroom (conducts professional development, in-service training, mentoring, coaching) - Shared decision-making - Participates in professional organizations - Increases student learning

Similarly, in the category of teacher leadership operationalized, both the research literature and the School of Education described teacher leaders as continuously improving their craft, willingly taking on tasks outside the classroom, and participating in school level decision-making. This was not true of the participants. To a large extent, their focus was on mentoring, tutoring, and supporting and building relationships with students- a much more student-centered/classroom centered viewpoint. Although some of the participants did mention improving their craft and sharing with others, their perspective lacked a whole school view of teacher leadership that extends beyond the classroom to the school at large. Though participants noted clear instances of leadership in the classroom and leadership within their cooperating teachers' meetings, it was the exception rather than the rule for participants to make a connection to teacher leaders influencing the school community, participating in decision-making, or conducting professional development, all tasks readily identified in both the research literature and the School of Education as tasks exemplifying teacher leaders. Our participants seemed to have a different view of what teacher leaders are and what teacher leaders do as it relates to the school outside their classroom walls.

Though the School of Education has a view of teacher leadership that coincides with the literature, this is not being transmitted to the students in the master's level elementary education program.

Student Recommendations

The research questions that guided the study were: (1) How do current preservice Elementary Education graduate students perceive the term "teacher leadership?" and (2) In what ways is it fostered in their coursework? As previously discussed, a majority of participants had difficulty answering the second part of the question. A follow-up question asked students to identify what the college could do to help foster teacher leadership. Again, some students had difficulty answering the question because they viewed teacher leadership as a construct that was difficult to identify and assess. Responses from students centered on the daily operation of schools both inside and outside of the classroom. One student's responses about the characteristics of a teacher leader mirrored the literature on the qualities of effective teachers (Stronge, 2007). Other students responded that they did not feel prepared for the multiple aspects of teaching that they knew they would be expected to perform upon entering the classroom. For example, one student stated that she was in need of knowledge and opportunities to increase her classroom management skills. Similarly, a student stated that she was not comfortable dealing with parents or other teachers. Another suggested that students be allowed more time to spend in schools, stating that courses at the college often interfere with important planning meetings that take place in her participating practicum school. Participation in those meetings, she believed, would further her development as a teacher leader.

Several students reported that they knew little about how schools operated outside of the classroom. One student stated that she was not familiar with the hierarchical structure of authority in a public school. Others reported that their coursework had only exposed them to schools from a classroom perspective, and that they were in need of more global perspective if they were to in fact become teacher leaders. Some of them stated that they did not have a handle on what they referred to as the "politics" of schools.

These findings suggest that students relate competence in all aspects of teaching--classroom management, peer relations, curriculum planning, understanding of the operation of the whole school, and so forth--to be requisite for teacher leadership. They also suggest that students feel that they are neither prepared to become teacher leaders when they enter the profession, nor that they, as graduates, will be apt to identify exactly what a teacher leader is or does. Students frequently reported that teacher leaders were assigned formal roles in schools and that they were not interested in immediately seeking such roles. Instead, they preferred to get acclimated to the classroom before taking on greater responsibility. This belief demonstrates a disconnection between the School of Education's definition of teacher leadership and the perception of teacher leadership held by students enrolled in the master's program. Participants acknowledged that they were only about halfway through the program at the time of the study's data collection, and therefore, their perceptions of how the program fostered teacher leadership might be

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incomplete. Several expressed optimism that many of their concerns would be addressed in upcoming courses.

Implications for Schools of Education

Results from this study demonstrated a disparity between the working definition of teacher leadership employed by this college's School of Education and the understandings that students in the program reported. While participants perceived that teacher leadership involved an array of qualities that fell into the emergent themes of collaboration, collegiality, instructional and content expertise, and flexibility, they further reported that their coursework provided limited opportunities to engage in activities that developed these qualities. This presents a dilemma. The literature on teacher leadership indicates that schools benefit when teachers take an active role in developing the talents of their colleagues (Firestone & Martinez, 2007; Harris & Muijs, 2003; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Results from this study, however, suggest that the School of Education may be missing an opportunity to prepare future teachers for this important role.

An opportunity exists for this School of Education to re-examine the way it purports to foster teacher leadership in preservice teacher training programs. This School of Education might consider adopting a uniform definition of teacher leadership and employing it in courses across the curriculum. Most participants in the study reported that teacher leadership was either not directly taught or was rarely mentioned in their coursework. Accordingly, professors may consider explicitly demonstrating the connection between and application of this uniform definition and their course content. Further, the School may want to explicitly talk about the role of the teacher beyond the classroom. Students should realize that although leadership in the classroom may be a primary focus of their work, there are other opportunities outside of the classroom for teachers to take leadership roles. Teacher leaders within the school and the school district help other teachers grow professionally. Rather than viewing these roles as extraneous to their core classroom responsibilities, emphasis might be placed on how teacher leaders can enhance the professional practice of colleagues and impact the learning of even more students.

To enable graduate students to visualize what these potential avenues for leadership might look like, the School of Education may consider restructuring courses to allow students to spend more time in a K-12 environment. In addition to spending time in the classroom with their cooperating teachers, graduate students could attend school improvement team meetings, meetings where teachers are planning professional development sessions, or school district committee meetings where teachers are providing input on policies that affect the district at large. Professional learning communities and vertical team meetings also provide an opportunity for preservice teachers to observe teacher leadership in action. Activities such as these may foster a greater understanding of the role of the classroom teacher within the context of the operation of the whole school and potentially within the district as well. If Schools of Education wish to prepare the next generation of teacher leaders, they must do more to connect the learning and experiences of preservice teachers in teacher preparation programs to the work that teacher leaders perform.

Limitations

Although this study adds to the body of knowledge about how students perceive the concept of teacher leadership; the findings may not be transferable to other institutions or graduate programs. Although techniques were in place to increase the trustworthiness of the study (triangulation and member-checking), the brief amount of time that was allocated for data collection severely limits the transferability of the study's results. Additionally, data collection occurred at approximately the mid-point of a year-long graduate program. Had data been collected at a different point along the program, results may have differed.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research on this topic may benefit from longer periods of data collection. A study that first examines student perceptions partway through their studies and then again at the end of their coursework would provide a more complete picture of how teacher leadership is fostered throughout the entire program. Similarly, future researchers may choose to study participants' perceptions after they have graduated and entered the workforce. Such a study may focus on how well new teachers believe their graduate training prepared them to be teacher leaders. Likewise, researchers could question the recent graduate's administrators to discover how long and in what ways teacher leadership is being manifested in these recently certified teachers.

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