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## Introduction to the Special Issue: International Perspectives of Teacher Leadership

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The International Journal of Teacher Leadership (IJTL) has prioritized the proliferation of research related to teacher leadership and development since its conception. Through collecting, reviewing, and disseminating current and international research biannually, IJTL informs educators, researchers, and scholars of the most recent body of literature and resources in the ever-evolving field of teacher education and teacher leadership. While a large volume of research and literature related to the field of teacher leadership exists, particularly in the United States, the IJTL offers global understandings and insights, attempting to synthesize how teacher leadership manifests, develops, and influences learning and school culture from an international perspective.

These teacher leadership insights hold particular weight currently, not solely because of the positive impact teacher leaders have on schools, but because issues of teacher retention continue to plague schools globally, and positive leadership has been frequently connected to retaining teachers, offering a means to mitigate this global challenge (Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2010; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; Wilson & Kelly, 2022). In fact, according to Tan et. al. (2025), the U.S. currently reports that 1 in 8 classes are unfilled or staffed by uncertified teachers. Similarly, UNESCO (2024) identified a need for nearly 44 million teachers worldwide. That same report described the staggering number of teacher shortages globally as an ongoing “crisis” in education (UNESCO, 2024, para. 2). Fortunately, Wilson and Kelly (2022), in their review of teacher shortages and teacher preparation in the U.S., consistently discovered the positive impact of teacher leadership on retention. In their cumulative discussion on teacher retention, Wilson and Kelly (2022) emphasized teacher leadership as one of the strongest resources for retaining teachers, recommending that practices and policies provide opportunities for leadership development. Moreover, Wilson and Kelly (2022) recommended that schools “create pathways for teacher leadership within schools and school districts” (p. 61) as a means to retain teachers. UNESCO (2024) also identified the importance of leadership internationally and teacher leadership specifically. This report, titled “Global Report on Teachers: Addressing Teacher Shortages and Transforming the Profession,” highlighted a multitude of international studies that connected positive teacher leadership and school leadership with teacher retention. From China to Latin America, this report concluded that effective teacher leadership offers the means to help offset teachers leaving the profession (UNESCO, 2024). This global challenge and the connection between retention and teacher leadership gives credence to the call of this special edition, as teacher leadership was further explored through the international contexts included in this edition.

This introduction to the special edition of IJTL offers a note on teacher leadership to contextualize these studies and the concept of teacher leadership in the literature. This section is followed by a brief description of this special edition’s call, highlighting the specific characteristics requested to inform teacher leadership through these international insights. A preview of each article follows, highlighting how teacher leader research is practiced in the context of the countries investigated in each study. Finally, this introduction concludes with the

guest editor's final thoughts, considerations, and questions to ponder as readers move through this special issue of the journal.

### **A Note on Teacher Leadership**

Given the extensive research on the concept of teacher leadership in the U.S., Wenner and Campbell (2017) conducted a systematic review to develop a comprehensive, research-based definition of teacher leadership and an understanding of the theories that have contributed to this definition. Through this analysis, which initially reviewed over 700 abstracts and was ultimately narrowed down to 54 pieces of literature, the authors discovered that even in studies that met all inclusion criteria and centered on teacher leadership considerations, definitions were often absent or borrowed. Surprisingly, more than half of the "literature (n = 35; 65%) simply listed others' definitions of teacher leadership or noted that there is often confusion surrounding the definition, but never definitively stated how they defined teacher leadership" (Wenner & Campbell, 2017, p. 145). Moreover, 21 pieces of literature included in the study (39%) mentioned theoretical frameworks, but according to Wenner and Campbell (2017), these studies "were judged to have not used the theory to inform their work" (p.147-148); i.e. nearly half of the studies included in their review incorporated theory but that theory did not orient or guide their analysis of teacher leadership. These startling findings collectively underscore the need for further exploration and clarification on the concept of teacher leadership as well as the theoretical frameworks utilized to investigate the topic.

Despite those concerns, Wenner and Campbell (2017) went on to initially define teacher leaders as "teachers who maintain K–12 classroom-based teaching responsibilities, while also taking on leadership responsibilities outside of the classroom" (p. 140). Then, through their analysis, they expanded this definition by offering the following 5 "themes" (Wenner & Campbell, 2017, p.146) to construct a more complete and research-rooted conceptualization of teacher leadership:

1. Teacher leadership goes beyond the classroom walls.
2. Teacher leaders should support professional learning in their schools.
3. Teacher leaders should be involved in policy and/or decision-making at some level.
4. The ultimate goal of teacher leadership is improving student learning and success.
5. Teacher leaders work toward improvement and change for the whole school organization.

This initial definition, coupled with these research-laden teacher leadership themes, provide useful conceptualizations to keep in mind as readers progress through the articles included in this issue and consider how teacher leadership manifests and impacts schools internationally.

Additionally, several articles in this journal directly cited Wenner and Campbell's (2017) review and reiterated this definition as well as their themes, because of its explicit focus on defining teacher leadership. However, while developing this definition, Wenner and Campbell (2017) acknowledged that it was largely missing international considerations. In fact, in their final review, only 9 studies (24%) included international contexts and considerations, and amongst those 9, sites were largely limited to the UK, Canada, and Australia. Thus, the following section describes this edition's specific international call and highlights how this work collectively

contributes to these conceptualizations of teacher leadership through an exclusively international lens.

### **Purpose and the Call**

For this edition, the focus and central purpose were to expand our knowledge of teacher leadership in international contexts and solicit perspectives, insights, and findings from non-US contexts to gain a deeper understanding of teacher leadership globally. Specifically, this call prioritized scholarship around diverse models of teacher leadership and the explicit roles and responsibilities of teacher leaders. This edition also called for scholarship on how teacher leaders influence their organizations in their varied contexts, as well as how others perceive that influence throughout the organization and at different levels within the organization.

Additionally, this call sought manuscripts that explored definitions of teacher leadership as well as how gender, ethnicity, culture, and identity influence the roles and responsibilities of teacher leaders. Wenner and Campbell (2017) also acknowledged how underrepresented groups were largely missing from the teacher leadership literature, noting that only 5 studies (9%) included in their review specifically explored considerations of gender, race, culture, and identity when defining teacher leadership. Finally, this call also considered scholarship that addressed the barriers and supports to teacher leadership, as well as prioritizing theoretical diversity in how researchers investigated, analyzed, and framed their studies. This need for further exploration of the theories, models, and frameworks utilized to understand and investigate teacher leadership was another shared concern for Wenner and Campbell (2017), who again determined that nearly half (39%) of the research included in their review failed to conduct meaningful theoretical analysis. Similarly, UNESCO (2024) emphasized the role innovative frameworks can play in understanding how to offset teacher attrition and cultivate teacher leaders, citing two studies conducted in South Africa and South Korea to illustrate this impact. Wenner and Campbell (2017) also concluded, “that future research exploring teacher leadership consider the theories that have been applied previously as well as the emphasized aspects of those theories so as to work toward a theory of teacher leadership” (p.161). Thus, while this call did not set forth a purpose of creating a working theory of teacher leadership, it hoped to address this theoretical need and contribute to this body of literature by directly calling for studies that examined teacher leadership with particular attention to their frameworks. Through this ambitious, comprehensive, and international call, 5 articles were selected, reviewed, and ultimately included in this edition. In the next section, each of those articles is briefly previewed to provide some background, highlight how each met the journal's call, and orient readers as they move through the collection.

### **An Overview of Articles**

This special edition, comprising five unique articles, explored teacher leadership across various contexts, including five countries spanning three continents, and in total, included perspectives from leaders in over 12 different countries. Through this global exploration, teacher leadership was investigated in a multitude of methodologies, frameworks, and with differing purposes, but each added to the field and expanded the concept of teacher leadership. Through quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies, each study addressed teacher leadership in different capacities, in diverse contexts, and through international perspectives. In addition, each article incorporated intentional theoretical and conceptual frameworks ranging from Social Network Analysis (SNA) to the International Study of Teacher Leadership (ISTL) research

framework to better understand the complexity of teacher leadership. To introduce readers to the specific articles in the edition, the following section includes a brief overview of the 5 studies and concludes with some final thoughts about the collection.

The first international exploration, *A Plurality of Teacher Leadership? A Study of Social Networks in Public High Schools in Santiago, Chile*, included 5 public schools which investigated 1) how teacher leadership was conceptualized across these spaces and according to local school professionals, and 2) how leadership dimensions and characteristics impacted leadership networks. These public school, metropolitan sites were intentionally selected because they offered such socioeconomic and ethnic diversity, speaking to recommendations of Wenner and Campbell (2017) as well as this edition's call (Bellei et al., 2020; Villalobos et al., 2017). Moreover, this study looked at leadership development, formation, and the leadership practices enacted by the individuals within and across this network according to those insider perspectives. This multiple case study design employed a sequential mixed methods design, coupled with Social Network Analysis (SNA) as the theoretical framework, to understand how these relationships develop, manifest, and impact teacher leadership. In total, over 65 school administrators, teachers, and staff were surveyed and later interviewed across the 5 schools to better understand how teacher leadership is conceptualized, developed, and supported within these networks.

The next article, *Grounding Teacher Leadership in the Politics of the Canadian Provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta*, grounded the study in an examination of the influence of the context on teacher leadership in the Canadian provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta specifically. This study is one component of the *International Study of Teacher Leadership* (ISTL), a collaborative research project involving 12 countries with an ultimate aim of understanding and improving teacher leadership. This study is the initial phase in the second stage of the ISTL (ISTL II) and called for a thorough review of the local context, its history, and understandings of teacher leadership. Thus, through a localized and focused scoping review, this study examined the major political, economic, cultural, and historical factors that influence teacher leaders in these provincial contexts (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). These localized considerations contribute to this special issue by offering insights into the specific historical and cultural factors that influenced teacher leadership in these provinces. Through their analysis, 6 concepts were identified that have impacted the sociopolitical context of teacher leaders across Saskatchewan and Alberta, highlighting the influence of local history, contextual nuances, and understandings on teacher leadership.

Following this contextual examination, *Beyond the Classroom: Exploring Teacher Leadership in Yucatan, Mexico*, offered the perspectives of 37 primary teachers to assess how they conceptualize, describe, and envision teacher leadership and the attributes of teacher leaders. This study utilized a convergent parallel mixed methods design, both surveying and interviewing participants on their experiences with and conceptualizations of teacher leaders. Through the administration of the Teacher Leadership Questionnaire, coupled with semi-structured interviews, primary teacher perspectives were collected, compared, and analyzed to understand how they described teacher leaders and their attributes. This study aligned directly with the special issue call through the definitions offered of teacher leadership and the attributes of teacher leaders according to international teacher perspectives. Moreover, this study spoke to the call's focus on gender considerations, as 84% of the participants surveyed were women, contributing meaning through quantitative data and subsequent analysis as rooted in gendered conceptualizations of teacher leadership. Finally, by overlapping teacher leadership and

pedagogical leadership as conceptual frameworks, the perceptions, definitions, and conceptualizations yielded through both quantitative and qualitative analysis were strategically juxtaposed with these two frameworks, highlighting how this study and its considerations further developed understandings of each.

The next perspective, *An Approximation to the Conception of Teacher Leadership in Argentina*, is the only strictly quantitative study in this collection. This study broadly sampled over 200 educational professionals in Argentina, including teachers, administrators, and other school support staff, to explore their conceptualizations of teacher leadership and the characteristics of teacher leaders. This study methods included the administration of a questionnaire developed by the International Survey on Teacher Leadership team to explore these conceptualizations as well as the perceived actions and practices of teacher leaders. Through exploratory factor analysis (EFA), paired with the International Study of Teacher Leadership (ISTL) research framework (Webber, 2023), underlying questionnaire factors were grouped to understand how latent, unobservable items impacted conceptualizations of teacher leadership in the Argentinian context. These findings contributed to this special issue through these groupings, areas perceived to be the most (and least) influenced by teacher leaders. Finally, these findings also provided insights into the factors, roles, and responsibilities perceived as the most closely related to teacher leaders in this South American context.

The final contribution to this issue, *The Spanish Model of Teachers as School Leaders: Key Aspects of Leadership for Inclusion and Sustainability*, explored the perspectives of teachers who transitioned into principalship, located in five schools in Catalonia, Spain. This qualitative study employed phenomenology to examine this leadership transition, the supports provided, and the effectiveness of the leadership development model from participant perspectives who transitioned into leadership positions through this model. Furthermore, through the incorporation of social justice as the theoretical framework, this study assessed their transition into leadership and the challenges and barriers they encountered through this transition, particularly in navigating social justice issues. Thus, this study not only explored navigating issues of culture, race, class, and their impact on teacher leadership through its theoretical approach, but it also contributed to models of teacher leadership and leadership development by incorporating a unique model of teacher leadership development, the Spanish management model. This leadership model selectively transitions more veteran teachers into formal leadership roles, offering distinct insights into teacher leadership in the Catalan context as well as how the leaders approach, address, and navigate issues of social justice. These school leaders and their contexts were intentionally selected due to recent waves of immigration in Spain, especially in the Catalonia area, and the specific demographics of their student populations, as they were adeptly situated as sites for exploring the development of teacher leadership, social justice considerations, and the complex relationship between the two (Catalan Social Action Entities ECAS, 2020).

## Conclusion

Through the research found in this special issue, teacher leadership is further explored through international, methodological, and theoretical considerations. While some articles attempted to define and describe teacher leadership according to their participants, others looked for relationships between responses, factors, and even leadership networks to better understand this complex topic across diverse contexts. The quantitative, qualitative, and mixed

methodologies found in this issue, coupled with intentional conceptual and theoretical frameworks, teacher leadership was explored and analyzed across three separate continents. Ultimately, this special edition incorporated nearly a thousand international educator perceptions through surveys, interviews, and questionnaires, all aimed at better understanding teacher leadership and the conceptualizations, characteristics, and attributes that undergird it.

The articles in this edition can be read as independent pieces or in a collective capacity, but each expands understandings of teacher leadership through international insights and the perspectives of educational professionals. Wenner and Campbell's (2017) initial definition and the subsequent themes they ascertained through their review provide a framework and conceptualization of teacher leadership to refer to as one moves through each article. With these conceptualizations in mind, one can develop, modify, and expand these considerations through the analysis, findings, and learning expounded upon in each article, with the ultimate aim of cultivating a more global and robust understanding of teacher leadership and the attributes, characteristics, and responsibilities required of and demonstrated by teacher leaders.

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