Teacher Leadership in International Context: A Synthesis of Empirical Studies from Five Countries

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Introduction

This special issue of *The International Journal of Teacher Leadership* highlights the intersections of teacher leadership emergence and context globally. Although scholars have generally agreed on the mechanisms that enact teacher leadership (i.e. mentoring, supporting professional learning, shared leadership, collaboration etc.) (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004), less attention has been given to comparing international perspectives on teacher leadership and to disentangling contextual factors that shape teacher leadership opportunities (Schott et al., 2020). This is important as scholars have emphasized the importance of teacher leadership in retaining teachers (UNESCO, 2024; Wilson & Kell, 2022) and have emphasized the absence of underrepresented groups in the teacher leadership literature (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Further, the lack of consensus surrounding the definition and characteristics of teacher leadership (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York et al., 2004) coupled with the inherent challenge of defining its roles and responsibilities (Angelle & Dehart, 2011), have clouded our collective understanding of teacher leadership emergence on a global scale. Internationally, scholars have pointed to the need to elucidate contextual factors that influence teacher leadership globally (Liu, 2021; Schott et al., 2020). In their edited volume, *Understanding Teacher Leadership in Educational Change: An International Perspective*, Liu and Thien (2024) identified geography, school-level factors, cultural contexts, school locale, and teacher demographics as key contextual factors that influence teacher leadership development and practice.

This special issue provides an important step towards addressing these unknown avenues of research, while exposing critical gaps that may reflect broader challenges and variations to teacher leadership scholarship across contexts. The articles in this special issue have provided five unique windows into the contextual realities facing educators who seek to influence pedagogy, school operations, and their communities. This is important as researchers have largely overlooked comparing perceptual differences of teacher leadership from those currently in that role (Angelle & DeHart, 2011). From Argentina's factor analysis of teacher leadership attributes, Canada's historically grounded examination of political influences, Chile's social network analysis, Spain's teacher-to-principal rotation system, to Mexico's distinction between teacher and pedagogical leadership, these studies have illuminated the complexities surrounding educators who aspire to broaden their sphere of influence. This epilogue to the issue synthesizes findings from these five studies to identify cross-cutting themes, position these international findings within the broader theoretical landscape of teacher leadership, offer implications for practice, and to pose recommendations for future research in this field.

Individual Capabilities of Teacher Leaders

Among these articles, individual factors of teacher leaders and striking variations in how these factors are recognized in teachers emerged as a cross-cutting theme. In Argentina, teacher leaders were distinguished by their professional profiles and proclivity towards educational

innovation. In this context professional competence, popularity, social justice orientation, and capacity emerged as distinguishing attributes of teacher leadership. Teachers with a strong work ethic, who took initiative for change, were viewed as fundamental to the change process and therefore were provided opportunities to influence. Similar findings surfaced in Mexico, as primary teachers identified commitment to professional development, conflict management skills, driving change, supporting colleagues, and active participation in the institutional transformational process as attributes of teacher leaders. These findings overlapped with the work of Arden and Okoko (2021), who identified influencing positive change as an international through line of teacher leadership conceptions across (1) school, community and formal education systems; (2) the teacher leader's professional self; and (3) broader historical, socio-political and global contexts. This change agency intersected with what Fierro-Evans and Fortoul-Ollivier (2021) argued were essential teacher leadership orientations in Spain, Columbia, and Mexico and in contexts with profound inequalities.

In Spain, having classroom experience and a desire to engage in professional collaboration was perceived to be invaluable characteristics of teacher leaders, and demonstrated their preparedness to enter a leadership role. Situated classroom knowledge legitimized teachers for leadership roles in Spain and was cornerstone to their credibility and influence once they attained a leadership position. Across these contexts, change agency, professional development orientations, experience and collegial support suggested a heightened focus on the individualistic capabilities of teacher leaders while ignoring structural factors, access to resources and opportunities that may develop these capabilities and skills.

Most of the studies in this issue found few differences based on gender, experience, or other personal identity markers. In Mexico, little difference existed between male and female leadership perceptions. This finding also surfaced in Argentina, where low variability in terms of sociodemographic characteristics prevented the authors from making meaningful comparisons between groups. This is a point of interest as previous research has shown that demographic variables influence teacher leadership emergence (Liu, 2021; Lie & Thien, 2024). The lack of difference between these groups might be due to the relatively small sample sizes included in these studies and reflect more dominant voices within these teaching populations. Additionally, the absence of indigenous voices was another point of interest given the substantial Indigenous populations in several of these countries.

Contextual and Micropolitical Realities

The articles in this issue shed light into the various contextual and micropolitical realities that shape teacher leadership emergence that are often ignored by many teacher leadership models (Flessa, 2009; Kelchtermans & Vanassche, 2017). Scholars have underscored the complex webs of power, policies, and politics that influence leadership emergence (Cisneros-Cohernour, 2021) and create obstacles for many teachers to navigate. In Chile's social network analysis, this was manifested as teachers indicated they exercised more influence in pedagogical networks in comparison to administrators who had greater influence in union networks (working conditions) and relational networks. In this case study, teachers exercised their pedagogical influence through the role of consultant, facilitator, and motivator of pedagogical activities at the classroom and school-level (i.e. sharing materials, supporting the planning process, advising on pedagogical strategies, organizing and promoting learning activates, and providing motivation towards these activities). Relationally, teachers in this context acted as interpersonal advisors for teachers encountering challenges between students, other teachers, and parents. However, in this

study administrators held a much more influential role in influencing relational networks and union-networks.

In Mexico, primary teachers identified innovative teaching, promoting inclusive practices that support diverse learners, engaging with parents, providing institutional change leadership, and developing novice teachers. Like Chile, these teacher leadership practices centered influence at the classroom level and did not emphasize more school-wide practices on assessment, professional development, community engagement, and curriculum implementation. These findings underscored how power tensions and micropolitics might be magnified in formal hierarchies and policies that dictate who gets to lead and under what predetermined conditions. Little (2002) emphasized this in their earlier work as teacher leadership was deemed as highly dependent on top-level administrators and their willingness to give power over to teachers. The findings of these studies point to the concern observed by scholars (Wenner & Campbell, 2017) that many teacher leadership practices are siloed to classroom-centered activities and depoliticize and restrain teacher leader influence beyond this. In Chile, this appeared to be the case as teacher leaders engaged in pedagogical and relational leadership practices centered on classroom practices.

Spain's teacher-to-principal rotation system, appeared to enable more democratic leadership emergence among teachers, as they served in conditional leadership roles before returning to the classroom. This alternative approach seemed to promote more inclusive teacher leadership access and emergence, however, it remained unclear how teachers were selected for these roles and whether the rotation system actually redistributes leadership influence or simply provides temporary administrative opportunities to a set group of privileged and experienced teachers. The authors indicated that a teacher's experience, commitment to inclusion, equity, and justice were valued qualities that informed leadership succession planning. Further, that adequately preparing teachers for succession was highly influenced by whether or not the current leader had accomplished their objectives and mission leading up to transfer of power. Although participants highlighted the challenges among this rotation system (i.e. moving from a teaching to administerial function and moving back to teaching function) and that it involved a series of decisions, actions, and adaptations, it remained unclear the nature of how these decisions, actions, and adaptations were made. Additionally, it was unclear if the constant turnover of new teacher-principals in this system keeps principals in a constant state of learning, empower more democratic teacher leadership opportunities, or channel teacher leadership influence towards sustaining institutionally acceptable practices and norms.

Colonial Histories

Across this collection of works, Canada's study stands alone in providing a historical analysis on how colonial legacies continue to shape contemporary educational leadership in Canada. Tracing historical connections between 17th-century European colonization to current debates surrounding indigenous education, the authors highlighted the challenges facing teacher leadership that are deeply embedded in the fabric of historical trauma and political tensions. Immigration, Indigenous reconciliation, and politicized educational debates have created what was described as an unstable educational landscape. The authors argued that this highly politicized landscape has driven teacher leaders to practice more self-preservation activities. This work brings a significant historical consciousness to Canada's colonial legacies that situates teacher leadership selection, the power they are afforded, and influences behaviors. Although

many of the countries in this issue share colonial histories, the absence of this focus reinforces a critical gap in our understanding of how teacher leadership may manifest as a result.

Teacher Leadership Frameworks

The studies in this special issue diverge (intentionally or unintentionally) from more traditional, universal and leader-centric leadership theories (traits, skills, behavioral, situational, etc.) and emphasize more distributed, collective, and contextually specific leadership approaches. This may have been done for good reason, as scholars have pushed back against applying more universal leadership theories internationally (Walker & Dimmock, 2009) as they often decontextualize and inadequately provide insight to the unique nuances of culture, politics, and educational characteristics that influence leadership emergence.

In Canada, the authors explicitly map geographical, historical, economic, and cultural contexts to understand teacher leadership emergence and behavior. In Chile, segregation, socio-educational conflicts, and institutional complexity shape distinct leadership networks. Rather than solely focusing on teacher leadership behaviors, these scholars organized their work around complex spheres of influence. For instance, in Argentina, four concentric spheres were emphasized: personal, classroom, school, and community. In Chile, distinctions were made between teacher leader influence in pedagogical, relational, and union networks. In Spain, discussions centered more on the transition from classroom teaching to leadership functions. Additionally, these articles focused on teacher identity and attributes, the process of becoming a leader, teacher recognition by peers, and informal leadership roles that coincide with their teaching positions. Multiple articles in this issue explicitly highlighted social justice orientations, inclusion and sustainability, diversity responsiveness, and navigating political dimensions.

Moreover, the variability of formal and informal leadership roles that teachers engage in, their influence as peers, their emphasis on collaborative knowledge construction vs. individual decision-making, and the diverse historical and cultural contexts that dictate leadership possibilities may also explain the shift away from universal leadership theories. As evidenced in these works, the lack of attention given to disentangling teacher leadership theories from more traditional leadership approaches may speak to our collective and natural association of "teacher" that is commonly disassociated with "leader". Or, to the fact that teacher leadership depicts a complex interplay between two intersecting identities that are accompanied by a myriad of roles and responsibilities shaped by context. It is no wonder that teacher leadership scholars have continued to voice complaints regarding the complexity of concretely defining it (Schott et al., 2020) and parsing out unique behaviors that coincide with that definition.

According to Wenner and Campbell's (2017) teacher leadership can be characterized by engaging in leadership beyond the classroom, supporting professional learning, engaging in policy and school-level decision-making, and working towards improvement and change with the goal of increasing student outcomes. York-Barr and Duke (2004) described it as an individual and collective process of teacher driven influence on their principal, colleagues, and community. According to Schott's et al. (2020) systematic review, teacher leadership involves multiple actors and is stimulated by antecedents on three levels: teacher antecedents (teacher skills and expertise), school-level antecedents (principal actions that facilitate leadership transitions, support, and shared decision-making), and supra-school level antecedents (trainers, networks, associations, governmental agencies, etc.).

With this conceptual lens in mind, articles in this special issue have pointed more to the antecedents to teacher leadership emergence at the teacher-level. Experience, change agency,

work ethic, taking initiative, professional development orientations, desire to support colleagues, and alignment to inclusion, equity and social justice were critical teacher-level antecedents that enacted teacher leadership in these contexts. Chile's social network analysis and Spain's rotation system did point to school-level antecedents that speak to the type of influence teacher leaders were afforded by the administration and rotation systems. Interestingly, supra-school level antecedents did not surface in this collection of works, and it remains unclear how these actors, if at all, influence teacher leadership emergence in these contexts. It was apparent in these works that teacher-level antecedents remain a point of priority in understanding the individual and collaborative process of teacher influence.

Implications and Future Recommendations for Research

Collectively, these works reveal important implications for practice and recommendations for future teacher leadership research going forward. Adequate training, professional development, administrative mentoring, and support systems were identified as important implications for practice across these works. It was evident that experience and competency were vital characteristics for teacher leadership emergence, and the authors emphasized the lack of preparation and adequate training in educator preparation programs and specialized professional development for teachers. More needs to be done with preparing teachers to address context specific challenges, managing diverse populations, and navigating politically charged educational environments. Scholars have highlighted the same inadequacies of educator preparation programs in equipping teachers to play a more active role in leadership (Gratacós et al., 2021), how to work with diverse populations (Pineda-Báez, 2021), and how they empower pre-service teachers to take on formal and informal leadership positions (van der Vyver et al., 2021). Pre-service and current teachers would greatly benefit by more exposure and more specialized training on what teacher leadership is, developing contextualized leadership skills, fostering a change agency, and developing pedagogical competency. Furthermore, more opportunities to engage in the change process at the school level and intentional support systems that emphasize communities of practice, distributed leadership, and contextualized capacity building would greatly benefit teachers aspiring for leadership opportunities.

The field of teacher leadership research would continue to benefit from definitional clarity of teacher leadership and research that explores the common threads of teacher leadership internationally. Additionally, disentangling the uniqueness and similarities between teacher leadership theoretical frameworks and universal leadership theories and organizational change models would be avenues worth exploring. Although scholars have argued that leadership must be understood in the specific education, cultural, political, and policy context from which it is embedded (Marfan & Pascual, 2018), there exists obvious links between universal leadership theories (skills, traits, behaviors, situational, etc.) and teacher leadership. More research that explores the development of leadership identity of teacher leaders across contexts would add significant insights to teacher-level antecedents that preempt leadership emergence. Moreover, more research explicitly investigating supra-level antecedents would illuminate how these actors intersect with teacher leadership emergence across context. Future research should also consider exploring more of the dark sides of teacher leadership (stress, anxiety, professional isolation, power structures, etc.), where it fails, and the unintended negative consequences that may surface when it is enacted. Lastly, future research must continue to move beyond simply documenting

how teacher leadership exists in siloed contexts, to fleshing out why and under what conditions it emerges, takes form, and how it can be authentically developed.

Conclusion

This paper has synthesized concurrent themes across the five international studies in this special issue and has discussed the intersection of these findings with teacher leadership definitions and theories. Additionally, this paper has positioned implications for practice and future recommendations for research to support to advance teacher leadership research and practice internationally. The International Journal of Teacher Leadership (IJTL) and this special issue have taken an important step in understanding the enactment of teacher leadership globally. The collection of these works has revealed a complex web of historical, political, organizational and individual factors that influence teacher leadership manifestations and underpin the notion that teacher leadership is fundamentally shaped by context. Although these works represent an important step to understanding teacher leadership enactment, significant work remains to address the critical gaps in our collective understanding of this phenomenon. The variations and fragmentations of teacher leadership across international contexts calls for us to continue our work exploring how different manifestations of teacher leadership best serve contexts and societies.

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