

## **From Teachers to Teacher-Leaders: A Case Study**

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This paper reports on a study of teacher leadership conducted in Alberta, Canada. Twenty-one school teachers and administrators were interviewed about their experiences with a provincial teacher-leader program in which they participated from 1997 to 2007. The participants were asked questions related to their experience in the program and how their participation in this initiative influenced their understanding of teacher leadership. Through an interpretive analysis of the data, we identified four themes that emerged from participant responses: (a) teacher leaders generally emerge through informal processes of leadership in their schools and school districts, (b) teacher leaders develop a broader understanding of educational leadership and policy when they work across jurisdictions and school contexts, (c) teacher leaders can be recruited into broader leadership roles by attending to their professional interests and passions, and (d) teacher leaders require flexible structures in the school that facilitate the development of trust and collegiality with their peers. We conclude that these themes play a crucial role in the development of teacher leadership. The findings of this study have implications for policy development, leader recruitment and retention, and teacher professional development approaches in schools.

### **Introduction**

In a time when teacher leadership has been positioned as a central component in discourses on educational change and improvement (York-Barr & Duke, 2004), research that focuses on what it means to become and be a teacher leader can make a valuable contribution to the conversation. This study aims to focus attention on the teachers' experiences of leadership.

In this paper we offer an analysis of a province-wide teacher leadership initiative that took place in Alberta, Canada, from 1997 to 2007. The TELUS Learning Connection (TLC) commenced in 1997 as an alliance of four provincial education partners – Alberta Education, the College of Alberta School Superintendents, the Alberta Teachers' Association, and the Alberta School Boards' Association – and a major corporate partner in Alberta. This initiative, administered by the 2Learn.ca Society, empowered educators, through a cascade professional development model and online tools and processes, to introduce innovation and technology infusion in K-12 curricula. It demonstrated how the creation of new processes for resource sharing and collaboration among educators resulted in meaningful integration and diffusion of information technologies skill sets. Central to this initiative was the concept of teacher leadership. The 2Learn.ca Society developed a Teacher-Leader Model (TLM) that empowered teachers with interest in technology and leadership potential to become teacher leaders in their

own school districts. There were over 250 teachers involved as teacher leaders through this initiative, and over 20,000 pages of curriculum-related resources were created by participants (Kullman, Clearly, & Bell, 2003). The leadership processes that emerged during the 2Learn.ca/TLC initiative were essential to the development of instructional practices in information technology at the local level within many school districts in the province.

### **Teacher Leadership in the Literature**

Teacher leadership, as a concept, has been in the educational lexicon for at least the past 20 years (Lieberman & Miller, 2004; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). It is difficult to establish the exact origin of the concept, and there has been substantial debate about what “teacher leadership” means (Barth, 2007). As a consequence, the research on teacher leadership is somewhat fragmented due to the lack of clarity of the concept itself and a lack of empirical research into teacher leadership (Jackson, Burns, Bassett, & Roberts, 2010). Much of the literature focuses on the elements of teacher leadership or the role of teacher leadership in educational improvement. For example, York-Barr and Duke (2004) indicated that

recognition of teacher leadership stems in part from new understandings about organizational development and leadership that suggest active involvement by individuals at all levels and within all domains of an organization is necessary if change is to take hold.... Educational improvement at the level of instruction, for example, necessarily involves leadership by teachers in classrooms and with peers. (p. 255)

The emphasis on teacher leadership as a vehicle for school improvement tends to cloud the important role of teacher leadership roles in the career advancement of teachers at the local level. In addition to the lack of research into the role of teacher leadership in teachers’ career advancement, the literature has been inclined to emphasize the circumstantial elements of teacher leadership without exploring the nature and consequences of this phenomenon for schools and educational systems. In fact, Reeves (2008) argued that “although the existing teacher leadership literature contains many compelling anecdotes and rhetorical flourishes, it is strikingly unburdened by evidence and systematic research” (p. 1). Harris and Muijs (2003) identified the benefits of teacher leadership: (a) improving school effectiveness, (b) improving teacher effectiveness, and (c) contributing to school improvement. Very little, however, has been written about the benefit to school systems of leadership development and career advancement as a result of teacher leadership. Murphy (2005) suggested that in role-based strategies of teacher leadership, expanded formal leadership roles for teachers may function as career ladders for personnel within educational systems. Additionally, Reeves (2008) argued that “the leadership shortage may be dire, but the leadership development potential is great, if only schools and systems will tap into the potential of teacher leadership....The problem is that they (i.e., teacher leaders) are largely unknown to the hierarchy and almost certainly not a part of it” (pp. 20-21). Similarly, Jackson et al. (2010) suggested that teacher leadership may serve as a valuable mechanism “in the recruitment and retention of so-called Generation Y teachers” (p. 4).

Lieberman, Saxl, and Miles (1988) investigated the characteristics of teacher leadership. In their view, teacher leaders (a) have a strong sense of purpose, (b) develop collegial relationships and collaboration, (c) move beyond the boundaries of their classrooms, and (d) influence

colleagues without the use of overt power. Rhodes and Brundrett (2006) presented the elements that head teachers in the United Kingdom believed were important for leadership talent development:

Most head teachers advocated a degree of empowerment, support, controlled risk-taking and accountability via project work as effective in-house leadership development. Some head teachers saw a role for themselves in offering feedback to aid confidence-building, suggesting that they avoid punitive actions should things go wrong in the first instance. Work shadowing and networking were emphasized by the majority of head teachers as effective in leadership development. An LEA initiative enabling subject leaders to visit other schools, engage in learning-walks, observe lessons, share documentation and plan with other subject leaders was much praised. (p. 280)

Several elements identified in the Rhodes and Brundrett (2006) study were also articulated by respondents in this study as central to their development as leaders. These include the following: (a) empowerment, (b) support, (c) risk taking, (d) confidence-building, and (e) opportunities to experience other educational contexts outside of their school environment.

Jackson et al. (2010) stated that the roles of teacher leaders are often constructed around coaching and facilitation roles. Further, they identify skills that teacher leaders require to function in these roles. Some of these skills might be more appropriately described as dispositions. They include (a) work ethic, (b) teamwork, (c) leadership, (d) openness, (e) vision, (f) positive affect, (g) risk taking, and (h) teaching related skills.

Jackson et al. (2010) identified a need for teacher leaders to develop facility in working with adult learners as central to the practice of teacher leadership. Smylie and Mayrowetz (2009) talked about several significant issues about teacher leadership that have implications for the way in which teachers become teacher leaders. They spoke of the “myth” that good teachers can become good teacher leaders. They suggest that this is an untenable assumption and that support and preparation for the role of teacher leadership is required. Our work documented here is an extension of this premise. The development of teacher leaders is more than an automatic process. Institutional support and the development of added skills and dispositions are required for teachers to move into teacher leadership roles. Similarly, Angelle and DeHart (2011) argued that those in formal leadership positions (i.e. principals) have a role to play in the identification, development, and training of teacher leaders.

The 2Learn.ca Society identified a set of criteria for Teacher-Leader selection. These criteria, while geared toward the attributes required for the TLC In-service Program, would be equally relevant descriptors for Teacher-Leaders. This set of criteria illustrated how the Society framed the concept of teacher leadership for the TLC program. The TELUS Learning Connection mission was “to facilitate effective use of information and communication technology - for, by and with Alberta teachers within all curricula.” According to the program, a teacher who would most benefit from participating in the initiative is a “process-oriented individual, with classroom experience and knowledge of the Alberta core curriculum” (Russell, 1998, p. 16). These teachers were perceived as active participants, facilitators, and mentors. According to this program, a teacher-leader has the following attributes:

1. Is student-centered.
2. Demonstrates effective and innovative classroom teaching strategies with a variety of resources.
3. Is a good communicator.
4. Demonstrates leadership in working with colleagues.
5. Is a risk-taker who is self-directed in solving problems; one who thrives on change.
6. Understands the role and challenges of being a mentor.
7. Wishes to investigate the effective use of technology.
8. Provides authentic learning experiences for students in his/her classroom. (Russell, 1998, p.18)

### **Methodology**

The data collection took place primarily through semi-structured interviews. We aimed to develop deep and robust insights into the ways in which former participants have experienced teacher leadership. We were particularly interested in describing how participants felt their experiences with the initiative contributed to their growth as teachers and as educational leaders. To fulfill this research purpose, we engaged in an exploration of the understandings and interpretations of former participants with respect to their experiences of the 2Learn.ca teacher leadership initiative. We gathered data through an iterative-inductive approach (O'Reilly, 2009) based on our interaction with these former and current teacher leaders. We employed an interpretivist framework to analyze the data (Schwandt, 2000). People assign meaning to their experiences through their interaction with the world. Through an interpretivist lens, it is possible to “understand how social reality, everyday life, is constituted in conversation and interaction” (Schwandt, 2000, p. 192). As patterns emerged from the data, we revised the research design, in particular the data collection process, to focus on those areas that appeared most fruitful for deeper study. The patterns emerging from the data allowed us to identify four key themes that related to (1) the processes that led to emergence of teacher leaders; (2) the ways in which teacher leaders developed their understanding of leadership; (3) the role of professional interests and motivations in recruiting teacher leaders; (4) the organizational arrangements that facilitate the emergence of teacher leaders. In order to explore these themes in more detail, we refined the questions included in the semi-structured interviews. In the next section we explain the interview process in more detail.

#### **Semi-structured interviews**

We utilized reputational sampling to invite 21 former participants of the teacher leadership initiative to participate in the study. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2001), reputational sampling is a type of purposeful sampling in which knowledgeable experts recommend cases to be included in the study. For this study, the participants were nominated by the 2Learn.ca society. However, the researchers and the program administrators determined the selection criterion. We attempted to select participants so as to include a representative sample in a variety of formal and non-formal leadership positions. Although we cannot establish that these participants are representative of the group of more than 250 former participants, we did endeavor to select a group of research participants that held a variety of informal and formal leadership positions in a variety of geographic areas of the province. As such, the conclusions

we draw are limited in terms of generalizability. This is in keeping with this type of interpretive research. The findings, while not broadly generalizable, are sufficiently rich to provide insights into the nature of “becoming” a teacher leader. We conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant. Where it was convenient, we conducted face-to-face interviews; where face-to-face interviews were impractical, we used videoconferencing to conduct interviews at a distance. The interviews were semi-structured so that participants could talk about their experience and perceptions while allowing for the researchers to probe for more detailed responses to ideas that emerged during the interview. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Initial open-ended questions allowed for participants to express their own opinions/understanding of their experiences with the 2Learn.ca teacher leadership initiative. The structure was flexible, with the interview questions being used as an initial guide (Sarantakos, 2005). Interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed. We also collected field notes and accessed documents provided to us by the participants. The field notes were taken during the face-to-face interviews and were intended to highlight aspects of the conversation that could not be recorded, such as emphasis and gestures. We also took notes that aimed to register the themes and topics that appeared during our conversations with the participants. Some participants provided us with samples of their work, such as curriculum-related resources that they created as a product of their participation in the initiative. This information helped us describe the contexts within which participants worked. Since the research was based on semi-structured interviews and became more refined as our knowledge grew, the interview questions were also refined over time. The following questions were used at the beginning of the study:

1. What is the nature of your current role/position?
2. In what ways did your experience with the 2Learn.ca teacher leadership initiative affect your career aspirations?
3. In what ways did your experience with the 2Learn.ca teacher leadership initiative affect your understandings of leadership?
4. Briefly describe your experiences with the 2Learn.ca teacher leadership initiative. How did you come to be involved with the 2Learn.ca teacher leadership initiative?
5. What happened with respect to your career after you ceased to be involved with the 2Learn.ca teacher leadership initiative?
6. What elements of the 2Learn.ca teacher leadership initiative do you feel impacted your future career/leadership experiences?

### **Data analysis**

Following the data collection, the interviews were transcribed in order to create a text reflecting conversations about the participants’ experiences with the 2Learn.ca Teacher Leadership initiative. Through content analysis (Sarantakos, 2005), the transcripts of the interview data were coded (using NVivo software) for themes, and categorized by looking for conceptual patterns (Stake, 2000). Working within an interpretivist framework, we assigned categories from the constructed meanings of the respondents within the context of the research (Sarantakos, 2005). By reading to identify and code recurrent patterns in the content of the text, it was possible to identify similarities and differences of what was being said, linguistic repertoires or “clusters of terms, descriptions and figures of speech” as the “building blocks used to make constructions or versions of cognitive processes, actions, policies and other phenomena”

(Sarantakos, 2005, p. 310). One way to understand people’s interpretations of their environment/experiences is to use content analysis to “examine the way in which meanings of social phenomena, as they are employed by people to make sense of their lives, are constructed” (Sarantakos, 2005, p. 310).

### **Participant demographics**

Participants, at the time of data collection, were working in all geographic regions of the province. There were nine female and 12 male participants involved in the interviews. The roles of the participants at the time of data collection ranged from being classroom teachers to being district superintendents to working for government or as private consultants. Our intention in this study was to investigate the experiences of former participants in the 2Learn.ca/TLC initiative and document the factors that contributed to their development as teacher leaders. Time and budgetary constraints prevented us from interviewing all 250 previous participants. We included the 21 participants that responded to our invitation. Details are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

<i>Participant Demographics</i>	
Role	N
Teacher	1
Vice Principal/Assistant Principal	2
Principal	3
Superintendent	1
Educational Technology Consultant/Coordinator/ Supervisor	11
Alberta Education	1
Retired/Private Consulting	2

All but one of the participants indicated that they had moved one or two levels higher in the organizational structure since the time they first became involved in the 2Learn.ca leadership program. In what follows we describe the themes that emerged in the interviews. We argue that these themes are of central importance in the development of formal and informal teacher leaders.

### **The Path to Teacher Leadership: Four Themes**

#### **Theme One: Teacher leaders generally emerge through informal processes of leadership in their schools and school districts.**

The interviewed teachers were asked to comment on how they understand teacher leadership and how they experienced teacher leadership during the 2Learn.ca tenure. As an example, the following respondent argued that teacher leadership ought to be a central concern for education systems. He suggested that teacher leadership is important as a mechanism that allows educators to take formal leadership positions, and, more importantly, the development of teacher leadership represents a process that generates a broad base of distributed leadership resulting in better student learning:

And what I want to do in my own organization is really get some depth of leadership, because not everybody wants to be a formal leader... we need those for sure... but the smarter people get in my organization about what it means to be a leader in whatever capacity it is, if you are the caretaker, supervisor or the English Department head at the high school, those skills of working with people, moving an agenda forward, those types of developing people, looking after people, that's just going to make us a healthier and better school district.

The respondents suggested that teacher leadership is a set of skills that evolve from the personal dispositions of certain teachers in certain contexts. Respondents spoke of two distinct forms of teacher leadership, formal teacher leadership and informal teacher leadership. In many cases participants had difficulty disentangling these two forms of teacher leadership. Clearly, in the case of 2Learn.ca Teacher-Leaders, they would be characterized as formal teacher leaders. This characterization is similar to DeMore Palmer's (2011) account of formal and informal teacher leaders: "Formal teacher leaders... are often chosen through a selection process after they apply for their positions, and they usually receive training for their responsibilities. Informal teacher leaders, conversely, emerge spontaneously from the teacher ranks" (p. 42). One of the participants intimated:

I really do want to broaden the leadership out. I want to certainly build a pool of individuals who can replace all of us aging formal leaders. But I also wanted to just develop leadership skills across the district, even if it just boils down to a teacher in a classroom with students better understanding relationships or better understanding how to work with people, even if they are young people, I think it'll make a better place.

Participants in this study did not always make clear distinctions between the formal teacher leadership roles they occupied and the informal teacher leadership roles represented by key teachers with whom they worked at local school sites. The informal teacher leaders referred to by 2Learn.ca participants were those teachers with whom 2Learn.ca Teacher-Leaders worked in a cascade-like professional development model. The success of the program was dependent on the interactions among the formal teacher leaders (2Learn.ca Teacher-Leaders) and informal teacher leaders (classroom teachers who take on local leadership roles as a result of their interaction with formal teacher leaders).

Paredes-Scribner and Bradley-Levine (2010) argued that the teachers' understandings of leadership influence the way teacher leaders are perceived in their schools and districts. In their study, Paredes-Scribner and Bradley-Levine noted the existence of a "cultural logic" in the school context that legitimized certain leadership practices and undermined others. For example, content area expertise was perceived as a stronger determinant of leadership authority, whereas organizational and management skills were seen as less relevant to lead. This finding resonates with our own findings in this study. The interviewed teachers achieved greater success leading their peers when they were perceived as colleagues that had expertise in their fields and did not rely on institutional status to mobilize other teachers.

**Theme Two: Teacher leaders develop a broader understanding of educational leadership and policy when they work across jurisdictions and school contexts.**

In relation to the capacity to move beyond the classroom into different contexts, it was clear from the responses that the participants saw the opportunity to move between contexts of practice as a step towards the consolidation of a their identity as teacher leaders. For instance, we asked a respondent if there was there any point when it occurred to him that he had moved beyond the role of being classroom teacher toward a broader, larger leadership role within the system. He commented on how the opportunity to be exposed to other contexts away from the classroom changed the manner in which he thought of himself as a professional:

And here, you're giving this presentation, and then I think... right now I have no fear of that .... It really changes the person where ... if you want to work outside of your system and I know it ... from the public speaking point of view, you definitely change, because you get used to doing lots of presentations.

Part of the experience of moving beyond the classroom was an increasing exposure to other possibilities and innovative ways of doing things which led to a broader perspective on what leadership means and the policy processes that underlie teaching practices. In the case of 2Learn.ca Teacher Leaders, the participants indicated that once they moved beyond their classrooms and engaged in processes of professional collaboration with other teachers, they gained a more complex understanding of the provincial policy on technology and its impact in classroom practices across school districts. The capacity to explore and experience other contexts of practice was beneficial to the Teacher Leaders because they realized how policies were implemented in other schools and had the opportunity to introduce some innovative practices to their peers.

In addition to the enhanced capacity to understand the policy and school contexts, the Teacher Leaders gained a deeper understanding of the way school change takes place in their own schools and districts. The capacity to move between contexts gave them a broader perspective that empowered them to initiate processes of organizational and curricular transformation:

I was just ... one of those teachers, in one of the schools that happened to... like working with others, work with technology. And you get exposed to that type of group, and it changes you as an individual. And then, when you go back into your system, you really feel empowered to try to ... cause systemic change from some of the things that you saw ... you had vision in terms of the how teaching could be. And ... a person was definitely grounded in the classroom ... to say, OK, here is the classroom staff, here is the technology, let's put the two together.

The remarkable transformation in this teacher's understandings of the school change processes are related to the opportunity he had to move between contexts of practice and enter in conversation with other teachers in different jurisdictions. These experiences were a clear determinant in the consolidation of processes of teacher leadership at the local level.

**Theme Three: Teacher leaders can be recruited into broader leadership roles by attending to their professional interests and passions.**

In their responses, the interviewed teachers indicated that they decided to participate in the 2Learn initiative because of their professional interests in technology and not necessarily because their participation would take them to leadership positions. In other words, the initial reason for many of these teachers getting involved in the initiative was the opportunity to explore their professional passions. Leadership and career advancement were not the main goals of many of these teachers. However, from the responses, it is apparent that the participants identified the processes of teacher leadership that emerged during the 2Learn.ca project as key mechanisms for the development of their leadership skills and aspirations:

Well... I don't know how things would be different... it's difficult to tell, but I believe that that project had a huge influence in terms of where I am right now, because, again, I'm much in... a capacity doing what I was doing under the project. And I believed and I saw certain things. It's just a passion for me. I follow my passions with it.

Their engagement in a process of professional development that resonated with their professional interests in technology led to their positioning as teacher leaders that ultimately resulted in career advancement. Research on distributed leadership (Harris, 2003, 2009; Spillane & Diamond, 2009) has shown that teacher leaders who do not hold formal leadership roles carry out a large percentage of leadership activities in school. Strikingly, many of the teachers who engage in these "unofficial" leadership activities do not generally perceive themselves as leaders, even though their work is crucial to the school operation on a daily basis (Muijs & Harris, 2006). This was true in the case of many of the 2Learn.ca participants. They joined the program without the primary intention of becoming school leaders. Instead, they were moved by their genuine interest in technology and student learning:

[T]he administration definitely embraced my passions and said, hey, would you consider doing this, that I think you'd be good at it. And life hasn't been the same since. And it just definitely invoked a lot of passion in terms of giving me vision for things.... It did change a person, there is no question about that.

The interest in taking on leadership roles appeared later when they realized their potential to inspire change in their schools and districts. In this regard, the promotion of their professional interests worked as a gateway to engage these teachers into broader leadership roles and to foster their aspirations to occupy formal leadership positions.

**Theme Four: Teacher leaders require flexible structures in the school that facilitate the development of trust and collegiality with their peers.**

In relation to collegiality, most respondents argued that teacher leadership is fundamentally about forming collegial relationships with other teachers. This relationship building and collaboration often represents a significantly different focus for Teacher-Leaders as they move more of their efforts toward engaging their colleagues in the schools as learners:

Well, teacher leadership is more about everybody and not just about me. I can be excellent by myself, but teacher leadership is about collaboration and about inspiring in others the desire to want to learn more and to want to try new and different things with their students in teaching and learning.

The respondents indicated that central to developing relationships with teachers is the ability a Teacher-Leader has to empower other teachers. They argued that building relationships with other teachers admits risk-taking and experimentation to take place. The trust that develops in these relationships generates a relatively safe context for exercising risk and experimentation. In relation to the capacity to influence other colleagues without the access to formal power/authority, we found that the participants understood this type of influence as beneficial to other teachers in the system who may be more willing to engage, participate, and take risks without the fear of reprisal. Respondents reported that this influence was often based on trust, credibility as a teacher, and the charisma of the Teacher-Leader:

A part of it, too, is maybe teacher-to-teacher where we were peers. I wasn't coming in as an administrator in the school and, say, I've got these great ideas, I'd like you to do them, I want you to make it happen. It was from one colleague to another and, say, would you consider trying this, because this is... a certain way of doing it. And I think from colleague to a colleague was a very powerful way of doing it. It wasn't a top-down thing.

The responses also suggested that the Teacher-Leader needs credibility as a teacher in order to successfully build relationships and influence other teachers. The interviewed teachers concurred in highlighting the importance of establishing a feeling of trust with their peers through the development of collegial relations based on a shared sense of professional identity. This finding echoes Collay's (2006) insights on the influence of professional identity in the teacher leaders' work. According to Collay (2006), teacher leaders "continue to shape their professional identities through interactions with others in the workplace. In addition to long-held beliefs about the teaching profession, teachers have deeply-held beliefs about what leading is and who can do it" (p. 133). The respondents suggested that teacher leadership is not only a means to formal leadership development, but also that Teacher Leaders constitute an important strength to schools in general because they are central to the educational mission of the schools.

York-Barr and Duke (2004) found that teacher leaders perform better and have more capacity to influence their peers when they are not perceived as superiors within the school or district's hierarchies. The respondents in this study were in a better position to engage in leadership activities with their peers when they engaged in collegial relations based on trust instead of relying on the bureaucratic hierarchy and authority. This finding suggests that schools and school districts interested in promoting processes of teacher leadership must be careful about the teacher-leader designation and the "formalization" of the leadership roles that teacher leaders carry out. York-Barr and Duke indicated that in many cases, the formalization of teacher leadership roles was associated with conflict rather than collaboration.

## Conclusions

We examined the beliefs and experiences of school teachers who participated in a provincial initiative that promoted teacher leadership through a cascade model of professional development. The literature on teacher leadership has focused on the role and importance of teacher leaders in educational organizations, overlooking how the emerging processes of teacher leadership are pivotal in teachers' career advancement, development as professionals, and development as leaders. This study aimed to contribute to the emerging literature on professional advancement of teachers by offering insights from a case study that explored how leadership roles were established through the teachers' involvement in a professional development initiative that created the conditions for the development of formal and informal leadership roles. The role of collaboration and relationship building is central to this teacher-leadership initiative. Collegial relationships appear to be dependent on the trust and credibility a teacher leader holds. The resultant Teacher-Leader relationships with his/her peers facilitated environments in which risk-taking and experimentation were the norm.

The teacher leadership processes that emerged through this program not only transformed the provincial curriculum on technology, they also contributed to the advancement of the participants' professional careers. The respondents identified their participation in the teacher leadership program as a contributing factor to their career development. They suggested that the skills and dispositions generated through their experiences with the Teacher-Leader Model resulted in aspirations toward more formal leadership positions. This coheres with what Reeves (2008) and Murphy (2005) have suggested – that teacher leadership has the potential to enhance leadership development and function to “ladder” teachers into more formal roles as leaders. Indeed, researchers and policy makers have been concerned about strategies to entice teachers to join leadership roles in school (Fink, 2010; 2011; Gronn & Lacey, 2006; White & Cooper, 2011). Although not the primary purpose of this paper, the case study explored in this paper offers useful insights into practical strategies to identify and motivate teachers interested in leadership roles in schools. Our conclusions are limited in terms of generalizability because we adopted a qualitative approach to study the process of becoming a teacher leader. We adopted a methodology that allowed us to explore the experiential component of the leadership process.

Central to the experience of teacher leadership is the requirement for Teacher-Leaders to move beyond the confines of their own classroom. This shift allows Teacher-Leaders to experience a broader perspective on schools and districts and provides them with opportunities to be exposed to different practices and contexts of teaching and leadership. Respondents in this study indicated that moving out of their classroom gave them insights into new and innovative ways of teaching. The mobility that they enjoyed during this program gave them the opportunity to transfer these practices to other sites and to establish professional relationships with their peers based on trust and collegiality. Additionally, the capacity to move between contexts also helped the teacher leaders to develop a deeper sense of professionalism and further aspirations for more formal roles. Once the participants experienced the broader context, they often reported an aspiration to have more of an influence at the district and provincial levels in order to contribute to systemic change. The distinction between formal and informal teacher leadership is an important one. Respondents in this study suggested that their work was characterized by interactions among formal Teacher-Leaders in the 2Learn.ca program and the emergent informal teacher leaders at the school level.

The feature that attracted the majority of participants to teacher leadership roles was a passion for technology and teaching. The combination of the two aspects appears to have been a pre-requisite for attracting highly qualified Teacher-Leaders to this program. One of the most important factors was the passion and vision for teaching and learning. Teacher-Leaders appear to be attracted to leadership roles in a particular area of passion or interest, rather than to leadership as a generalized role.

In this study we aimed to provide useful insights into the emergent processes of teacher leadership that take place when teachers are given the opportunity to learn and explore their areas of professional interest, take risks, and explore other contexts of practice. Clearly, in a time when more of the educational improvement discourse is pointing to the value of teacher leadership in driving educational change, more attention on the features of teacher leadership, as well as the processes of “becoming” a teacher leader are needed.

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