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Empowerment through a teacher leadership academy

Jeremy D. Visone
Educational Leadership, Policy, and Instructional Technology, Central Connecticut State University, New Britain, Connecticut, USA

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the effectiveness of a teacher leadership academy (TLA) organized through a school district/university partnership in a small, US Suburban School District in increasing teachers' participation in leadership activities.

Design/methodology/approach – TLA participants ($n = 11$) were surveyed using the Teacher Leadership Activities Scale, and their results were compared to a control group of teachers in the district who were not participating in the TLA ($n = 12$). Interviews and open-ended response items provided qualitative data to examine how the TLA contributed to teachers' growth as leaders.

Findings – Results indicated that teachers in the TLA did increase participation in teacher leadership activities. Qualitative data revealed themes of many espoused benefits from TLA participation, including increased interactions with administrators, improved understanding of the obstacles associated with implementing changes, and expanded leadership capacity.

Research limitations/implications – Conditions that both enhanced and detracted from teacher leaders' growth were identified and outlined, including formal leaders' participation in TLA activities, material support for projects, and a supportive atmosphere (enhancers) and administrative roadblocks and the inability to remediate capacity issues for teacher leaders (detractors).

Originality/value – The conditions outlined above will assist those interested in creating TLAs in doing so with purpose and increased chance for buy in and success.

Keywords Distributed leadership, Teacher leadership, Empowerment

Paper type Research paper

The construct of teacher leadership in North America has garnered much attention over the last several decades (Smylie and Denny, 1990; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 1995; Leithwood and Jantzi, 1999; Frost, 2003; York-Barr and Duke, 2004; Danielson, 2007; Crowther *et al.*, 2009; Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2009; Ross *et al.*, 2011; Sinha and Hanuscin, 2017). The interest in the construct for improving schools has not been limited to North America and has been illustrated through numerous international studies, as well (Cheng, 1994; Muijs and Harris, 2006; Keung, 2009; Beycioglu and Aslan, 2010; Kiranli, 2013; Colak *et al.*, 2014). Less frequently represented in the discussion of teacher leadership are studies that empirically examine the effectiveness of specific approaches to foster leadership capacities of or in increasing the frequency of participation in leadership activities for teachers. Notable exceptions would be the work of Sinha and Hanuscin (2017), who examined the process of three teachers as they became teacher leaders, and of Ross *et al.* (2011) and Ovington *et al.* (2002), who both outlined the benefits of university-based graduate programs to prepare teacher leaders.

This paper will report on the success of a teacher leadership academy (TLA) in a public school district with a university partnership. This builds on prior literature by assessing the success of this partnership program, which met less frequently and required considerably

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fewer contact hours than a university-based program. This mixed-methods study was designed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. Does a district/university partnership TLA increase teachers' participation in teacher leadership activities?

RQ2. How do teachers develop as teacher leaders through participation in a district/university partnership TLA?

Any discussion of teacher leadership should be grounded in the principles of distributing leadership (Harris, 2005). This construct will be briefly examined, prior to exploring teacher leadership.

Review of literature

Distributing leadership

One reason teacher leadership has garnered so much attention is the connection between successful schools and distributing leadership throughout organizational levels, particularly among teachers (Spillane *et al.*, 2001; Leithwood *et al.*, 2004; Marzano *et al.*, 2005; Spillane, 2006; DuFour and Marzano, 2011; Diamond and Spillane, 2016). Understanding the dynamic and complex world of public schools, one can visualize that leadership can be metaphorically "stretched over individuals" (Diamond and Spillane, 2016, p. 148), so that leadership practices are undertaken by many across different roles. A teacher might lead a committee that helps design new school-wide rubrics, while a psychologist might lead a restorative justice initiative. In a crisis, a nurse may lead, delegating tasks to others called to help. Additionally, it is common for formal leaders, such as principals and superintendents, to perform leadership functions in concert with others, thus distributing the work of those in formal positions of authority (Diamond and Spillane, 2016).

The value of distributing leadership is supported by research on effective schools (Visone, 2018). In their research on the effect of leadership on student achievement, Marzano *et al.* (2005) identified a construct they called input to be among the "21 responsibilities of school leaders" (p. 52). The authors referenced practices such as using teams to make decisions, allowing individuals to influence school policies, and having staff members provide input into decision making. Other authors have asserted that distributing leadership allows for more strategic application of individuals' capacities and talents to organizational success (Elmore, 2000; Leithwood *et al.*, 2004).

Another rationale for distributing leadership is the volume of work and complexity of decision making required to operate schools. Simply, principals cannot know and do it all (Leithwood *et al.*, 2004; Danielson, 2007).

Teacher leadership

Conceptualizations of teacher leadership are varied (York-Barr and Duke, 2004). For example, Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) suggested, "[Teacher leaders] [. . .] identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders, and influence others toward improved educational practice" (p. 5). Another conceptualization is that teacher leadership "facilitates principled action to achieve whole-school success. It [. . .] contributes to long-term, enhanced quality of community life" (Crowther *et al.*, 2009, p. 10). Common to both definitions is improving learning, from both the teacher and student perspectives, as well as building a strong school community, which reflects its culture (York-Barr and Duke, 2004).

Operationally, one can consider teacher leadership from the perspective of roles and actions of teacher leaders. Many authors have attempted to outline these roles (Danielson, 2007; Harrison and Killion, 2007; Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession, 2009; Crowther *et al.*, 2009; Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2009; Keung, 2009; Watt *et al.*, 2009;

Beycioglu and Aslan, 2010; Angelle and DeHart, 2011; Kiranli, 2013). For example, teacher leaders are commonly described to be mentors for colleagues, sharing ideas, modeling professional behaviors and pedagogical skills, and collaborating regularly. Leading professional learning is also a distinct role for teacher leaders, whereby teacher leaders seek out information that will help raise the level of practice in their schools and then share this information with colleagues. The preceding constructs fall under the auspices of instructional leadership (Marzano *et al.*, 2005; DuFour and Marzano, 2011), and these were the most frequently noted roles for teacher leaders, which is logical, as teachers spend the majority of their time teaching and building pedagogical expertise. Additionally, authors offered more logistical and traditional leadership roles for teacher leaders.

One of the more prominent formal leadership roles in the teacher leadership literature is the role these individuals play in school improvement practices. These teachers consider the needs of all students in the school, not just those they teach, and use systems thinking to diagnose and solve problems for the benefit of all (Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession, 2009; Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2009; Watt *et al.*, 2009; Beycioglu and Aslan, 2010). To a lesser degree, teacher leaders have been portrayed as those teachers who chair committees or teams (Harrison and Killion, 2007; Watt *et al.*, 2009), influence school practices and policies, serve as designees for their formal leaders and assist in making personnel and budgetary decisions (Danielson, 2007; Harrison and Killion, 2007; Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2009; Keung, 2009; Watt *et al.*, 2009; Beycioglu and Aslan, 2010; Angelle and DeHart, 2011). Beycioglu and Aslan (2010) suggested these individuals lead research projects that relate to teaching, while other authors saw teacher leaders as innovators for their schools and colleagues (Danielson, 2007; Crowther *et al.*, 2009; Watt *et al.*, 2009). Further still, Sinha and Hanuscin (2017) argued that teacher leaders cannot be such until they both engage in concrete leadership activities and also view themselves as leaders.

Finally, teacher leaders contribute to the overall culture of their buildings. This contribution has been described as diffuse (Danielson, 2007; Crowther *et al.*, 2009). More specifically, others have pointed to teacher leaders' ability to see multiple perspectives and keep their minds open, which can lead to an overall sense of growth and learning in the school (Harrison and Killion, 2007; Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession, 2009; Beycioglu and Aslan, 2010). Crowther *et al.* (2009) and Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) shared that teacher leaders contribute to improving pedagogical practice and helping all students achieve. Given the varied and important roles that teacher leaders can exhibit, it follows to consider how to develop these qualities in teachers.

Developing teacher leadership

Various authors have outlined approaches to increase teacher leadership capacity (Ovington *et al.*, 2002; Crowther *et al.*, 2009; Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2009; Ross *et al.*, 2011; Taylor *et al.*, 2011; Sinha and Hanuscin, 2017). Sinha and Hanuscin (2017) began by defining teacher leadership, including a didactic understanding of how teacher leadership can look and how teachers could implement projects that would provide opportunities to display their leadership skills. Throughout their learning and project implementation, the teacher leaders were encouraged, provided with helpful feedback, recognized for their efforts and generally supported with needed resources to successfully complete their projects.

Others have outlined what school leaders can do to nurture teacher leadership in their own schools (Crowther *et al.*, 2009; Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2009). The authors advocated for setting up conditions for teacher leadership to develop and be supported, as well as specific structures and protocols to develop teacher leaders. For example, Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) argued that relationships among adults in the school, school organizational

structures and principal actions influenced teacher leadership development. A concrete example of the authors' suggestions include using an inventory to generate conversations amongst teachers about their educational philosophy, which will lead to deep conversations about the purpose of educators' work, eventually leading to a deepening commitment to all students' learning, not just the students in individual teachers' classrooms. Crowther *et al.* (2009) suggested that teacher leadership is, in fact, distributed leadership, and that teacher leaders are developed through principals creating parallel leadership contexts where the formal leaders will lead with and alongside teacher leaders, who help them manage projects and solve problems, among other roles.

Other authors (Ovington *et al.*, 2002; Ross *et al.*, 2011; Taylor *et al.*, 2011) developed teacher leadership through university graduate programs, which included courses of study with many contact hours. For example, Ross *et al.* (2011) included six core courses in teacher leadership: guided inquiry, culturally responsive classroom management, transforming the curriculum, data-driven decision making, teacher leadership for school change and differentiating instruction. These approaches require considerable resources and time commitments for all involved. In this study, a comparatively streamlined program to develop teacher leadership was examined.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study includes the findings from three key studies about the development of teacher leaders (Ovington *et al.*, 2002; Watt *et al.*, 2009; Ross *et al.*, 2011). Ovington *et al.* (2002) found that their program increased teacher leaders' confidence, comfort with leadership roles and participation in professional development activities. These benefits could be described as dispositional and action oriented.

Ross *et al.* (2011), using Mezirow's (2000) concept of transformational learning, found that teacher leaders in their program experienced transformational learning for two teacher frames of reference (inquiry stance and view of themselves as an autonomous professional) and two leadership frames (leadership stance and viewing student learning as a communal responsibility). Inquiry stance was the constant questioning of teaching practices' effectiveness, to aid in school improvement efforts and boost student achievement, consistent with the cultural outcomes asserted by others (Crowther *et al.*, 2009; Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2009). The view of oneself as an autonomous professional is manifested by a teacher no longer seeking direction from formal leaders, but, rather, fully accepting the responsibility of pedagogical and professional decisions. Leadership stance refers to teachers recognizing that leadership does not just rest with those with formal titles – that it is an expectation of all teachers. This philosophy is consistent with my observations regarding teachers' professional learning via observing one another's instruction (Visone, 2016) and other authors' findings that teachers' work to share with others and solve problems collectively without a formal title should be considered leadership (Taylor *et al.*, 2011). Finally, viewing student learning as a communal responsibility is a perspective that creates collective ownership over what happens within a school, which is a quality of some of the most effective schools (Visone, 2018) and those that have learning cultures that support teacher leadership (Taylor *et al.*, 2011). Both of the leadership frames of reference are empowering, which is consistent with research on the most effective schools (Visone, 2018), as these schools displayed empowerment conditions to allow teachers to exert leadership influence to maximize student achievement. These conditions included distributed leadership, such as teachers facilitating professional learning, mentoring colleagues, and/or chairing teams and committees. They also included specific principal behaviors (recall Crowther *et al.*, 2009; Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2009) to nurture teacher leadership, such as principals trusting teachers to take instructional risks and actively encouraging them to assume leadership roles.

Method

The teacher leadership academy

Teachers in a small, suburban school district in the Northeastern USA were recruited to join a TLA for the 2017–2018 school year. The TLA was co-facilitated by a central office curriculum administrator and the author, a university professor with many years of building-based administrative experience. The invitation was open to any teachers across the entire district, though administrators could raise concerns about any participants. Notably, there were no administrator concerns about any of the 13 participants. The participants were both male and female teachers from both the elementary and secondary levels, and their years of experience ranged from 5 years to over 20 years. Ages ranged from late 20s to early 50s, and subject areas taught included all four core subject areas and several special area subjects, as well. Of the 13 TLA participants, 11 consented to participation in the study, and 12 non-TLA participants consented to join the control group.

The TLA met for five, 2-hour meetings throughout the year. The first two meetings were devoted to building a shared vision for the TLA, as well as learning about the following topics that were requested by participants: leadership theory, elements of teacher leadership, adult learning, difficult conversations and dynamics of change within schools. The final three meetings were primarily devoted to selecting and planning to implement leadership projects of the teachers' choosing. The facilitators were available during all meetings to assist teacher leaders in independent or group projects. Further, each planning meeting also included time for the group to discuss problems of practice they were experiencing.

Data

Quantitative data were obtained by surveying participants with the Teacher Leadership Activities Scale (TLAS) adapted from Watt *et al.* (2009); the items constituting this scale are found in the list below. This validated instrument includes Likert-scale items for teachers to rate their frequency of performing teacher leadership activities. The items were rated by participants on the following scale: 1 = not yet, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes and 4 = often. The survey was administered in the fall of 2017, prior to the first TLA meeting. The survey was readministered in the spring of 2018, following the year's work within the TLA. Results were compared, overall, and by item, in a pre- and posttest model, using descriptive statistics, *t*-tests and effect size calculations. The overall sample size ($n = 23$) was too small to break the group into subgroups for separate analyses.

Items from the Teacher Leadership Activities Scale (TLAS)[a]
How often do I:

(1) display involvement/membership in professional teacher organizations?

(2) help design school policy?

(3) become involved in school-level decision making?

(4) plan school improvement?

(5) redesign instruction based upon student assessment?

(6) share ideas with colleagues?

(7) mentor new teachers/colleagues?

(8) help make personnel decisions?

(9) create partnerships with the community?

(10) become involved with selecting types of professional development?

(11) present or lead a workshop/session for colleagues?

(12) influence school budgeting?

(13) collaborate with peers?

(14) lead or chair school committees?

(15) reflect on your own teaching practice?

(16) initiate school activities?

Notes: [a]The TLAS was used with permission of the authors (Watt *et al.*, 2009). The spring survey also included an open-ended prompt: "Please share any thoughts you have about your participation in leadership activities this year, including how your participation may have changed over the course of this school year."

For effect size calculations, Cohen's d was used, which was described recently by Conn (2017) and can be expressed as:

$$d_{\mathrm{sm}} = \frac{\overline{x}_T - \overline{x}_C}{S_{\mathrm{pooled}}}, \tag{1}$$

where:

$$S_{\mathrm{pooled}} = \sqrt{\frac{(n_T - 1)S_T^2 + (n_C - 1)S_C^2}{n_T + n_C - 2}}. \tag{2}$$

Qualitative data were obtained from two main sources. First, TLA participants were interviewed in the spring of 2018. The interview questions for the semi-structured focus groups are found in the list below. Second, open-ended item responses from the spring survey were analyzed. Qualitative data analysis was consistent with the grounded theory principles of Strauss and Corbin (1998) and the constant comparative methods of Glaser (1965), including a period of open coding, leading to axial coding to determine the codes' dimensions, as well as relationships between categories and their subcategories, and selective coding to arrive at themes. Throughout the entire data analysis process, the researcher repeatedly returned to raw data to determine the applicability of emergent codes for previously analyzed data. Some categorical codes were based upon the review of literature (see, e.g., Crowther *et al.*, 2009; Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2009) included valuing others' opinions, displaying emotional intelligence, empowerment and nurturing teacher leadership. Open codes that emerged from the participants' responses included better appreciation of the obstacles, administrative roadblocks and collaboration with colleagues. Axial coding revealed, for example, that administrative support ranged from excellent to being completely left out of implementing their own ideas. From such analysis, themes were developed.

Semi-structured focus group interview protocol questions:

(1) Please describe how your status as a teacher leader has evolved over the course of this year.

(2) If you have described a change over the course of this year, please explain what factors, experiences and/or learning have impacted you and how they have impacted you.

(3) Please identify ways in which you have exhibited teacher leadership this year.

(4) What obstacles or challenges have you encountered as a teacher leader, and if you have encountered any, what have you been able to do to overcome the obstacles or challenges?

(5) What do you believe you still need to become the teacher leader you wish to be?

(6) Please share anything else relevant to your development as a teacher leader that has not been adequately addressed by the previous items.

Results

Quantitative results

An aggregate mean for all sample items was computed for both the control and experimental groups, for each data collection period (fall and spring). These means are found in Table I. The control group reported a decrease in teacher leadership activity over the course of the school year, whereas TLA participants reported an increase. Thus, by comparing the means, only, we find a difference between the control and experimental groups.

Next, mean differences were calculated by item and by group on the TLAS, including an aggregate mean difference across all items. These mean differences are found in Table II. It is clear that the overall finding of increase in reported activity for the TLA group from pre- to post-survey periods did not hold true for all constructs. For example, for items about planning school improvement, mentoring new teachers, influencing school budget and initiating school activities, TLA participants actually reported less involvement in the spring. For the items about designing school policy, sharing ideas with colleagues, helping make personnel decisions and leading professional development, the TLA participants reported no changes from fall to spring. However, for the other eight items, the TLA participants reported an increase in activity in the spring. Further, for all but four items (designing school policy, sharing ideas with colleagues, helping make personnel decisions and influencing the budget), the TLA participants had a more positive mean difference than the control group participants.

Independent *t*-tests determined if there were significant differences in the means between the control and TLA groups. These results are found in Table III. Equality of variances was assumed, given that Levene's Test yielded significances greater than 0.05 (0.37 and 0.18, respectively) (Holcomb, 2006). The *t*-tests revealed that the control and TLA groups did not have significant differences between their reported teacher leadership activities in the fall. However, after a year of participation, TLA participants reported teacher leadership activity that was significantly greater than control group participants.

Finally, Cohen's *d* was applied to determine the relative effect sizes of the year of growth for teachers in the control and TLA groups, with respect to their participation in teacher leadership activity. For the control group, who reported, on average, less teacher leadership activity in the spring, an effect size of −0.44 was obtained. For the TLA group, a value of 0.16 was obtained. Whereas, this latter effect size could be considered a rather weak effect (Muijs, 2004), it is quite considerably more positive than the control group's result, and, when combined with the other quantitative and qualitative results (see below), one must

Table I. Aggregate means for pre- and post-TLAS administration (control: $n = 12$; TLA: $n = 11$)

Data collection period	Group	Mean	SD
Fall	Control	2.61	0.32
	TLA	2.88	0.46
Spring	Control	2.48	0.27
	TLA	2.95	0.49

Item	Group	Mean difference	SD
Aggregate of All TLS items	Control	−0.13	0.39
	TLA	0.07	0.34
Involvement with teacher organizations	Control	−0.25	0.62
	TLA	0.18	0.98
Design school policy	Control	0.00	1.28
	TLA	0.00	1.00
School-level decisions	Control	−0.42	0.67
	TLA	0.09	0.94
Plan school improvement	Control	−0.42	0.79
	TLA	−0.09	0.70
Redesign instruction from assessment	Control	0.17	1.03
	TLA	0.18	0.40
Share ideas with colleagues	Control	0.08	0.51
	TLA	0.00	0.00
Mentor new teachers	Control	−0.50	0.90
	TLA	−0.09	0.94
Help make personnel decisions	Control	0.08	1.31
	TLA	0.00	0.77
Create partnerships with the community	Control	0.00	0.95
	TLA	0.27	1.10
Select types of professional development	Control	−0.08	1.16
	TLA	0.36	0.92
Lead professional development	Control	−0.17	0.94
	TLA	0.00	0.89
Influence school budget	Control	0.00	0.60
	TLA	−0.09	0.54
Collaborate with peers	Control	−0.08	0.29
	TLA	0.09	0.30
Lead or chair committees	Control	−0.25	1.29
	TLA	0.36	0.67
Reflect on own teaching	Control	−0.08	0.29
	TLA	0.00	0.00
Initiate school activities	Control	−0.17	1.11
	TLA	−0.09	0.94

Table II. Mean differences for pre- and post-TLAS administration (control: $n = 12$; TLA: $n = 11$)

Data Collection Period	t	Degrees of freedom	Significance
Fall	−1.592	21	0.127
Spring	−2.836	21	0.010

Table III. Results of t-tests for aggregate fall to spring surveys

recognize that TLA participants' time in the program appears to have influenced their practice as teacher leaders positively.

Qualitative results

Through the process of analyzing open and categorical codes from teacher leader interviews and open-ended survey responses, themes emerged. Namely, a major theme of benefits espoused for teacher leaders, including forging stronger relationships with administrators, developing a more accurate appreciation for obstacles that oppose change, building their leadership capacity, and becoming empowered as leaders via growth in their leadership stance and logistical considerations. A second theme included conditions that surrounded the TLA, including enhancers (i.e. growth mindset) and detractors (i.e. administrative roadblocks).

Espoused benefits. Teacher leaders reported that they developed stronger relationships with administrators when vetting and planning their projects. This is due to teacher leaders' need for administrative support for their projects' success. One teacher commented, "This has built my relationship really closely with the principal because now I know this is the plan." She was originally unsure of the direction to take, but, after working directly with the principal, she now understood where she needed to go. Another teacher learned the best way to get dates scheduled with one administrator:

> I started drafting […] an email to […] get this thing coordinated. And I decided, no, that's probably not the best thing to do. So I called up her secretary and scheduled a face-to-face meeting […] while we were there, I got permission to bring my kids down there. And we scheduled the date. And we got books.

She learned that the personal connection is best, and that it is really more efficient than repeated emails. Another teacher marveled at her and her partner's success while working with the superintendent and assistant superintendent: "we realized how large of an undertaking this project is and that they were also taking steps to achieve the same goals. Together we identified steps that our group could take." For teachers, who do not typically work with central office administrators, this was a unique collaboration opportunity.

As teacher leaders learned about how to lead their peers and work through administrators, they became more aware of some of the obstacles to create change. As one teacher remarked, the TLA experience, "offers greater insight into the challenges." These obstacles and challenges included logistics, such as lack of time, communication issues, and the magnitude of the work required. Sometimes, undertakings are just bigger than one can anticipate, and more minds on the problem are helpful: "it's a lot bigger than I think I would have been able to tackle by myself." Another teacher learned about the importance of following up communications sent: "I learned that I got to make sure [to] stay on top of it. I waited too long to hear back." This was due to her wanting to be "nice": "I didn't want to be a thorn." However, she realized that "they're not trying to avoid you […] sometimes people get busy."

However, the majority of the codes about obstacles dealt with working with peers. First, there was a terse and all-encompassing observation that "Change is hard." Further, when addressing why change is so difficult, teacher leaders pointed to those they are helping to lead. "[T]here are [a] lot of different personalities […] and it's not always easy." Another teacher remarked, "I also have to be patient in my leadership, because not everybody's at the same place and build the capacity of others to get there when they get there." Another teacher outlined challenges that accompany having to check on whether colleagues are doing their jobs. "[T]hat's kind of a tough conversation that I had to go to my colleagues and say, I need to see what you're doing […] but that's leadership […]" Another leader described a remedy for the tough conversations, "It's not about us. We have to make this change, and it's for the kids' benefit, and that's kind of how I've overcome those challenges." Ultimately, a student-centered philosophy is the antidote to resistance to change.

Developing leadership capacity. Teachers also outlined their growing leadership capacities through TLA participation. First, teachers were excited to build a professional network across their schools and district: "I've had lots of conversations with […] different people that I don't know I would have had those conversations otherwise." Further, teachers recognized that the collective problem solving that can occur through collaborating and "idea sharing" with colleagues is invaluable, "I strongly believe talking to colleagues and hearing how they handle certain situations is extremely beneficial." Another talked about the "opportunity to work with colleagues that I usually do not work with and a platform to ask for guidance and problem-solving." The benefit of meeting with colleagues was the most often identified code in the data set.

Teachers' confidence in their leadership abilities grew due to their participation in the TLA. Namely, "I am more confident as a leader as a result of participating in the Teacher Leadership Academy." Some increase in confidence resulted from peer reactions: "[T]hem having the confidence in me to be able to teach them something […] [I] look at myself more as a leader than [I] would have otherwise." This increase in confidence had the direct result of these teachers being more open to leadership roles: "I am less apprehensive at taking leadership roles."

Teachers discussed how their so-called "soft skills" or emotional intelligence increased, consistent with Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) and Crowther *et al.* (2009). First, teachers recognized the need to build buy in with peers prior to implementing change: "you're not going to try to do something without having the backing." Stated another way: "I really do want to make sure that everybody is on board and sees the vision and understands the vision and [is] willing to participate in it." This buy in comes after credibility is established: "I would be a fraud, if I didn't know what I was talking about. So I became Google level one certified just so that I would have […] credibility." Of course, the best way to build buy in, they found, was through working together and respecting the viewpoints of others:

> I do want to be that transformational leader, where I want everybody on board to make sure we meet the needs of students and see that vision and work hard to get that together […] [to] have empathy and then also look at things from their point of view […]

Another teacher commented on the importance of those other points of view:

> […] just being open to hearing what they had to say. And that's a […] huge thing I've noticed is not being so stuck in what I believe in […] because I want to hear what my colleagues [think] because they have great ideas.

Ultimately, they realized that their effectiveness in building buy in depended on their ability to build relationships: "[S]trategies when dealing with a variety of people – strong willed people […] would come in handy […] and just making sure that [they know] I have their back." On the opposite end of the relationship-building continuum is having difficult conversations, when necessary. A teacher commented, "Lessons on dealing with a variety of colleagues and having difficult conversations made me think about how I react in particular situations." Also, as referenced above, teachers recognized the importance of how effectively they can communicate with others, including leadership.

An important aspect of communicating with leadership is advocating for oneself. This was a recurring data point. One teacher commented on how part of the problem is assuming that administrators know when you want to be involved, "I put it out there […] if it happens, it happens, but at least she knows [I am interested]." Another remarked, "You may have to just go and speak up and tell them you are a leader." There are leadership opportunities to be had, if one is willing to advocate for oneself. A teacher leader encapsulated this thinking by stating that the TLA, "has empowered me to be a self-advocate."

Empowerment via leadership stance and logistics. Overall, the TLA was empowering to teacher leaders, and this exact word was found as an *in vivo* code throughout the data set. "I think it's really empowering to make change," remarked one teacher. The empowerment was seen through the changing mindset of the teachers, as they began to think more like leaders, and less like teachers. "[I]t has been very different than looking through the teacher lens so that looking in that different leadership lens versus the teacher lens was empowering." The empowerment resulted, in part, from the strength found within the cohort, as described above and here: "I was empowered because if we had some problems or issues, I was able to bounce them off you and my colleagues [in the TLA]." Other elements of the TLA experience also contributed to the empowerment.

First, specific instruction demystified teacher leadership, which was consistent with Taylor *et al.* (2011). One teacher realized, “you don’t need [certification] to be a leader […] [the TLA] helped me see that […]” For others, empowerment resulted from the aforementioned confidence, as peers began to view the teachers as leaders: “I feel like people knew who to come to and who to ask if they have a question about our topic […] I felt like they had a point person.” For still other teacher leaders, opportunities afforded to them by the TLA resulted in empowerment:

> [The] teacher leadership program […] gave me the ability and the time. I made sure I carve time for that to be able to start a new initiative, and I am kind of thankful for that experience because it […] it just structured, and it just organized it, and I was supported.

Finally, the TLA provided a forum that supported the work and growth of the teacher leaders, leading to empowerment. Remarked one teacher, “[T]he [TLA] afforded me the opportunity to work with colleagues that I usually do not work with and a platform to ask for guidance and problem-solving.”

Conditions surrounding the TLA. The teacher leaders reported various conditions that either enhanced or detracted from their leadership efforts. Aside from professional learning (e.g. “I learned a great deal.”), the presence of like-/open-minded individuals supported a growth mindset. One teacher commented, “I enjoyed spending time with colleagues and just figuring out how to grow. We’re always growing, right?” Putting the professional learning together with supportive colleagues was inspiring, as well as empowering: “[I]t also empowered our colleagues to want to learn more […] so that they could do the things that they were hearing about.” Teachers also praised the work of others in the TLA: “Find the opportunities like [Mary]. You went ahead, and you got Google certified.” They were even encouraging each other to do more: “I see you doing a leadership […] PD yourself.”

Logistically, support from the TLA and district helped nurture the teacher leaders. Stated one teacher, “I liked having the support and meeting with [a TLA facilitator] throughout the year and checking in,” while another commented on district support: “I also have the support from my administrators as a result of the program.” Other teachers credited the structure and scaffolding of the TLA as supportive of their growth. Ultimately, a student-centered focus and communal responsibility for student learning garnered the most observed codes in this theme of conditions. Comments here included, “helping them understand it is all for students. This is not about me […] we keep the focus on students,” “[I am] accountable to the students […] I want to do a good job. I’m not around here, like, ‘Okay, how can I get out of this, how can I get out of that?’ I’m here sometimes to 10 o’clock,” and “It’s not about us. We have to make this change, and it’s for the kids’ benefit […] I need to be better for the kids.” These comments, from three different teacher leaders, represent the type of collective commitment evident in the TLA, which is consistent with Taylor *et al.* (2011).

Conversely, there were detracting conditions. First and foremost, administrators did not always provide the teacher leaders with the support they were seeking. Administrative roadblocks included lengthy communications delays when teachers sought approval, attempting to change the teachers’ minds about what projects to undertake, and even removing teachers from the very projects they were spearheading, only to continue the work themselves without the teachers. Though these situations were more exception than norm, they are necessary to consider, as they show the importance of administrators’ buy in and support for the ultimate empowerment of teacher leaders. One teacher complained: “After meeting with the [administrators], my plan changed significantly. I also was not included in the event that I had hoped to initiate. The event is happening without me. This is frustrating.” Further, many teachers commented

that they had hoped for more direct involvement in the TLA from administrators. One teacher summed these sentiments up thusly:

> For the administrators to actually come in and be part of this Academy to say these are some of the things that I'd like to see some people […] take a role in. And to work with us in that way so that it's not us having to go to the administration, but a true collaboration between both levels, and I would like to see that much more.

To a lesser degree, the skill sets and dispositions of the teacher leaders provided some detracting conditions. For example, the communications lessons learned referenced above (i.e. regarding face-to-face meetings and following up) represented situations when teacher leaders lost time or did not accomplish a desirable result due to their own inexperience. However, these situations did prove to be valuable learning experiences. Finally, feelings of vulnerability did inhibit some teacher leader action, at least at first. One teacher commented, "I felt so vulnerable doing that […] I don't want to be shut down."

Discussion

Overall, synthesizing the quantitative and qualitative data sources indicates that the TLA, with its streamlined design and limited resources, did increase teachers' participation in teacher leadership activities. Further, the qualitative data yielded many insights into the value of this program for teacher leaders.

First, the design of the program is worth replicating. Consistent with Sinha and Hanuscin (2017), the movement from didactic learning about teacher leadership to the design and implementation of projects of personal value resulted in empowerment for teachers. They reported learning much from the program and being empowered that they, as teachers, could enact change and lead their colleagues. Consistent with Ovington *et al.* (2002), participants in the TLA did espouse greater confidence in their ability to lead, take on more leadership roles, and, at least through the qualitative data, become more involved with professional learning through their specific projects, which included, for example, creating self-directed professional learning modules and serving as technology integration experts for colleagues. Though the time commitment and resources likely paled in comparison to some of the other key teacher leadership programs studied in the literature, like those at the university graduate level (Ovington *et al.*, 2002; Ross *et al.*, 2011; Taylor *et al.*, 2011) and those designed for use within a school or district (Crowther *et al.*, 2009; Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2009), there was real value and growth for teachers.

For those seeking to implement a TLA, one might expect benefits that include teachers realizing transformation in their leadership stance (Ross *et al.*, 2011) and increasing leadership capacity, which can engender more distribution of leadership (Crowther *et al.*, 2009; Elmore, 2000; Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2009; Leithwood *et al.*, 2004). This will mirror the trend of some of the most effective schools, whose efforts to distribute leadership have been well documented (Leithwood *et al.*, 2004; Visone, 2018). Ultimately, the empowerment of teachers to see themselves as leaders (Visone, 2016) can result in a more shared commitment to and collective responsibility for the learning of all students – desirable traits for any school that wants to achieve high levels of student success (Crowther *et al.*, 2009; Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2009; Ross *et al.*, 2011; Visone, 2018).

To create conditions conducive to empower teacher leaders, school leaders should heed the advice of TLA participants that they will maximize teachers' growth and buy in by working directly with the TLA, providing scaffolding, material support and approval for teachers' proposals (Crowther *et al.*, 2009; Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2009). Participants expressed that this was a key missing link. Leaders should also counteract detracting influences on teacher leaders' growth, such as encouraging teachers when they are feeling vulnerable and using professional learning opportunities to remediate gaps in capacity.

Figure 1 displays the relationship between the enhancing and detracting influences on outcomes for TLA participants.

The presence of a cohort of student-centered, like-minded individuals with growth mindsets was repeatedly referenced as supportive. This condition can, perhaps, support the teachers' growth as autonomous professionals (Ross *et al.*, 2011), as they are learning from one another, as opposed to taking direction from those in formal leadership positions, and building their confidence as leaders (Ovington *et al.*, 2002) by the affirmation and encouragement they provide each other.

Limitations of this study include the small sample size. No broad generalizations should be made across contexts, and more research in urban and rural settings could help to corroborate findings. Another limitation is the short timeframe of data collection. This study could easily have been extended into a second year of learning, action planning and data collection. Thus, it is logical that, with more learning and experience, participants' growth would have been even more pronounced. Further, some of the mean differences for the experimental group could be muted by the lack of knowledge about leadership possessed by participants prior to participation. Anecdotally, participants often commented how this learning helped to "open their eyes" to challenges, complexities and dynamics that were completely unknown before. Thus, they felt they might have rated themselves lower in the spring on several activities because they now had a more complete understanding of what these leadership activities entailed. Thus, the quantitative results are even more encouraging.

Implications for practice include the obvious recommendation that such a cohort-based school district/university partnership TLA can be a successful way to build leadership capacity amongst teachers. Further, the general model of moving from more concrete learning about teacher leadership into action-oriented projects, all the while including collaboration time for participants, seems like one worth replicating. Based upon comments from the teacher leaders, it would benefit participating districts to ensure administrators are providing material

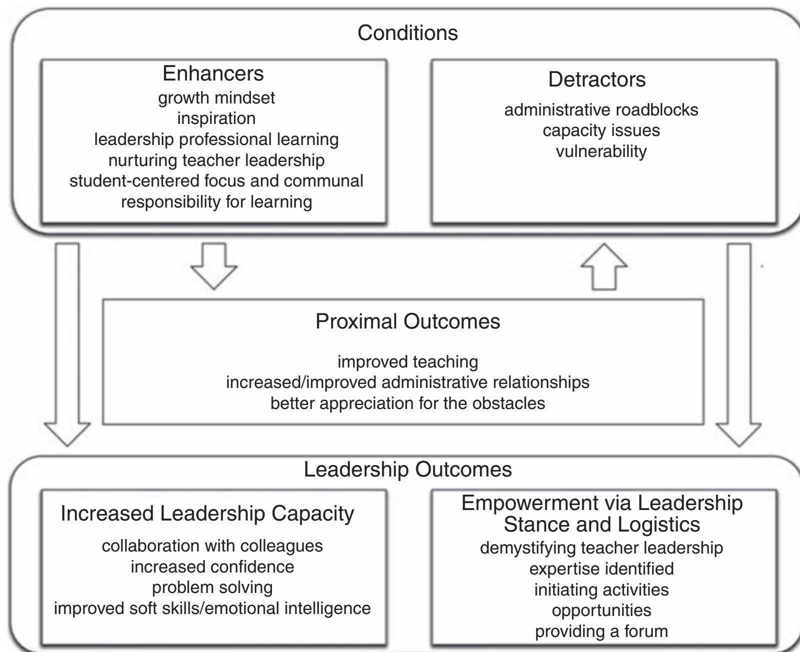

Figure 1.
Conditions influencing outcomes for TLA participants

support and are involved in the teacher leaders' journey, to avoid administrative roadblocks and wasted time. In short, a TLA for developing teachers' leadership skills can be a vehicle to empower teachers, providing them with the knowledge, opportunities, skills, and support to create meaningful change within their schools and districts.

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Further reading

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Corresponding author
Jeremy D. Visone can be contacted at: visone@ccsu.edu

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