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The Impact of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) On 10 Early Career Teachers Who Seek to Understand the Meaning and Practice of Teacher Leadership

Laura Alsbrooks Goldzung

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THE IMPACT OF A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY (PLC) ON 10 EARLY
CAREER TEACHERS WHO SEEK TO UNDERSTAND THE MEANING AND PRACTICE OF
TEACHER LEADERSHIP

by

Laura Alsbrooks Goldzung

Bachelor of Individualized Study
George Mason University, 2004

Master of Education
George Mason University, 2008

Education Specialist
Virginia Polytechnic and State University, 2013

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Curriculum and Instruction

College of Education

University of South Carolina

2021

Accepted by:

James Kirylo, Major Professor

Todd Lilly, Committee Member

Suha Tamim, Committee Member

Ken Vogler, Committee Member

Tracey L. Weldon, Interim Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, who supported, encouraged, and challenged me to follow my dream. To my parents – you have always respected my choices and celebrated my accomplishments. You instilled in me the value of education and stressed the importance of good teaching to building great communities and supporting democratic ideals. To my children – you have walked beside me in pursuit of this goal and have been my companions through countless hours of reading and writing. I treasure every minute. To my husband of 30 years – you gave me the courage, space, and time I needed to see this through to the end. Thank you for your faith and love.

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ABSTRACT

Early career teachers are eager to engage in leadership given supportive cultural conditions, relevant training and development, and school structures encourage all members to contribute to the teaching process. The aim of this action research study was to explore the meaning and practice of teacher leadership with 10 early career teachers through participation in an eight-week professional learning community (PLC) book study. Selected readings informed group discussion topics and reflections in journal entries. Qualitative data analysis revealed three themes that work in concert to create conditions that support teacher leadership at ABC Elementary School (ABCES): communication, professional trust, and a culture of contribution. Action steps for the local setting were developed to apply new understandings, insights, and key feedback from the participants. In response to the findings, the school principal was prompted to create more opportunities for teacher leaders and to distribute decision-making across the teaching staff.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Within every school there is a sleeping giant of teacher leadership that can be a strong catalyst for making changes to improve student learning.

(Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009, p. 7)

In pursuit of school improvement, the roles and responsibilities of teachers have extended well beyond classroom instruction to include facilitating team meetings, analyzing data, providing professional development, and moderating adult relationships (Harrison Berg, 2018; Ingersoll et al., 2018). In their seminal work on teacher leadership, Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) suggest that teacher leadership can take many forms, including assigned roles and responsibilities or influential relationships with peers. In an effort to harness the energy of teachers as leaders, some schools are moving away from hierarchically structured decision-making to bring the voice, experience, and collective wisdom of classroom teachers to the forefront (Fiarman, 2017; Fong & Lewis, 2018; Von Dohlen & Karvonen, 2018).

As schools seek to retain teachers in an era of shortages, teacher leadership is seen as a pathway toward empowerment, motivation, and the development of a shared vision for the organization (Fong & Lewis, 2018). The literature exploring teacher leadership seems to agree with Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) and their belief that empowering teachers to assert their influence through leadership is the way to leverage an untapped source of energy, ideas, and capacity for improvement of educational systems for all

(Fiarman, 2017; Fong & Lewis, 2018; Harrison Berg, 2018; Ingersoll et al., 2018; Smylie & Eckert, 2018; Von Dohlen & Karvonen, 2018). Ado (2016) notes that there are reasons to consider early career, or novice, teachers for these positions, “ranging from the philosophical, that teacher leadership as a paradigm should include all teachers at various career stages...to the practical, as some schools are staffed primarily with novice teachers” (p. 5).

According to Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009), the increased presence of teacher leadership in our schools is “evidenced by the vast growth of the numbers of instructional leadership positions, the inclusion of teacher leadership in standards for teachers, and collaborative work across states on licensure for teacher leaders” (p. 9). The inclusion of leadership skills as criteria for measuring teacher quality indicates a more widespread expectation of this dimension of professionalism. For example, North Carolina, South Carolina, Massachusetts, and New Jersey include leadership skills and strategies as part of their criteria for evaluating teacher performance (Von Dohlen & Karvonen, 2018). Additionally, the Commonwealth of Virginia is considering adding teacher leader positions and staffing ratios to their Standards of Quality because “Teachers in schools with shared leadership were more likely to implement best practices and more likely to see higher levels of student achievement” (Robbins & Piver-Renna, 2019, slide 14).

Even though there is consensus that teacher leadership can have a positive impact on student achievement, there is still little agreement as to the definition and scope of practice of teacher leaders or how teacher leaders should function within the larger structure of K-12 education (Ingersoll et al., 2018; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Smylie & Eckert, 2018; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Yet, the

descriptors of teacher leadership contained in the literature can be classified into two overarching thematic categories: personal characteristics and operational tasks.

Personal characteristics, such as concern for the welfare of all students, being passionate about equity, sharing knowledge, and professional generosity, are among some of the traits demonstrated by teacher leaders (Hunzicker, 2017a). Operational competencies, like the ability to manage collaborative team meetings, meet organizational deadlines, and facilitate data discussions, are also a hallmark of teacher leaders (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Smulyan, 2016; Von Dohlen & Karvonen, 2018; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Character traits and a personal orientation toward leadership coupled with the skills needed to manage the day-to-day operations of a team are necessary for effective leadership, but the context of the leadership activity adds to the complexity and challenge of defining the phenomenon.

Problem of Practice

ABC Elementary School (ABCES) is a Title 1 school located in a small suburban city in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. An instructional staff composed of 48 licensed teachers and 13 instructional assistants work together to meet the needs of a diverse student population. The demographics at ABCES create a majority-minority student population: 56% Hispanic, 12% Black, 5.5% Asian, and 8% reporting more than one race. Additionally, 50% of ABCES students are considered economically disadvantaged (Virginia Department of Education, 2020). Like schools across the nation with similar demographics, ABCES has a history of high levels of teacher attrition (Goldring et al., 2014). This attrition pattern resulted in 57% of teachers during the 2020-2021 school year having six or fewer years of experience in the school setting.

However, according to annual district-administered climate surveys, recent changes to the instructional program and overall culture suggest a shift in the longstanding trend of teachers leaving ABCES for schools in the surrounding and more affluent counties. In the last three years, ABCES has focused professional development efforts on building collaborative spaces that emphasize shared responsibility for student learning. ABCES is beginning to build stabilized team environments dedicated to increasing achievement while supporting the social-emotional development of our students. As the principal, I rely on strong teaching teams to execute the mission and vision of our school; deepening our collaborative processes will require the distribution of leadership and collective support of teacher leaders by all members of the organization.

Some of the early career teachers at ABCES have expressed a desire to contribute to the leadership process, but their exposure to leadership models in the school setting has been limited to a handful of examples from the small pool of experienced teachers on staff. They have not experienced a wide range of approaches to the practice of leadership. Like many schools, the traditional teacher leadership structures at ABCES are hierarchical (see Figure 1.1).

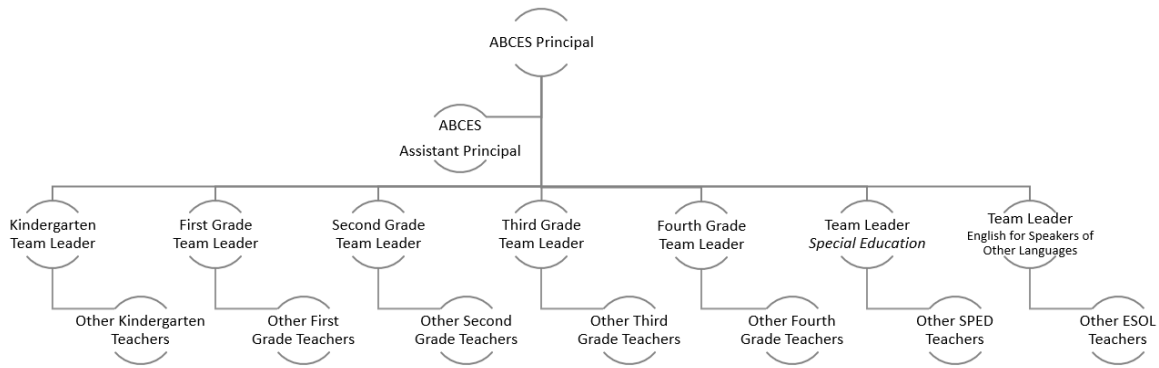


Figure 1.1 *Current Grade-Level Leadership Structures at ABCES*

The current structures restrict teacher leadership opportunities to seven people: one teacher from each team. Due to the limited exposure to leadership styles, some of our early career teachers have developed misconceptions about the scope of practice and skills necessary for effective teacher leadership in the school setting. Therefore, the problem of practice for this study is the limited understanding of early career teachers regarding the complexities of teacher leadership at ABCES.

Research Question

What impact will a professional learning community (PLC) have on 10 early career teachers who seek to understand the meaning and practice of teacher leadership?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of a professional learning community (PLC) on 10 early career teachers who seek to understand the meaning and practice of teacher leadership.

Teacher leadership is a broad label, or construct, under which many actions, beliefs, and responsibilities can be housed. However, teacher leadership develops to meet the needs of the local educational setting and is shaped by the context, making it difficult to generalize, define, and measure. Therefore, based on the work of Katezenmeyer and Moller (2009), Smulyan (2016), Von Dohlen and Karvonen (2018), and Wenner and Campbell (2017), for the purposes of this study, teacher leadership will be defined as follows:

Building professional relationships that encourage others to engage deeply with the work of education; leveraging influence formally and informally across the organization to solve problems; utilizing teacher voice to advocate for all students; and participation in shared decision-making processes where the collective goal is the improvement of the school organization as a whole.

A professional learning community (PLC) is a group of educators working together to construct new meaning around a topic of study relevant to their work in a specific setting. For the purposes of this study, PLC will be defined as described by DuFour et al. (2016): “An ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (p. 10). The treatment central to this study was a PLC that featured weekly discussions and reflective writing based on a variety of professional readings relative to teacher leadership.

The teacher group at ABCES worked together as a PLC to increase their understanding of the meaning and practice of teacher leadership within the local school setting. Lambert (2005) emphasizes collaboration as central to leadership, which she

defines as “reciprocal, purposeful learning together in community. Reciprocity is essential to solving problems and working collaboratively” (p. 38). A study of selected chapters from a variety of texts about teacher leadership was central to the PLC book study process. Additionally, the PLC participants engaged in discussions about the nature of teacher leadership within the school and how teacher leadership can be activated to improve student learning outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

This action research study was framed by two theoretical perspectives: Theory of Action for Teacher Leadership and Distributed Leadership Theory (Northouse, 2019; Sergiovanni, 2007; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). The Theory of Action for Teacher Leadership is a conceptual model developed by Jennifer York-Barr and Karen Duke (2004) at the conclusion of their review of the literature on teacher leadership. The conceptual model suggests “a path by which teachers who lead ultimately can influence student learning” (p. 289). The Theory of Action for Teacher Leadership provides a seven-step framework for defining and exploring the phenomenon of teacher leadership within an organization. Figure 1.2 illustrates the seven areas of consideration for teacher leadership suggested by York-Barr and Duke (2004).

The first three foundational elements address important personal characteristics of teacher leaders, favorable conditions for teacher leadership, and the nature of leadership work performed by teachers in the school setting. These elements were used to frame the PLC book study by guiding the selected readings for the book study.

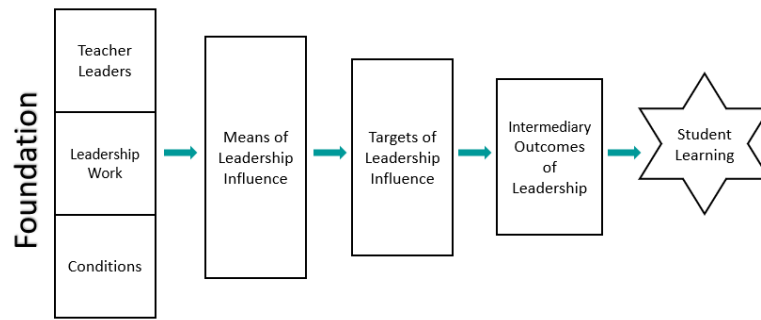


Figure 1.2 *The Theory of Action for Teacher Leadership Conceptual Model (York-Barr & Duke, 2004)*

Additionally, the framework suggests the examination of how and where teacher leaders can apply their influence. The last step on the pathway toward influencing student learning outcomes is to explore the organizational changes or “intermediary outcomes” (e.g., improved teaching practices, shared professional knowledge) of teacher leadership (York-Barr & Duke, 2004, p. 289).

Distributed Leadership Theory supports the idea that those with the knowledge, motivation, and ability to address a problem have the agency to step into the leadership role in a given circumstance (Northouse, 2019; Sergiovanni, 2007). When framing the construct of teacher leadership through the lens of Distributed Leadership Theory, the action research challenged ideas about the traditional, hierarchically arranged decision-making structures of an elementary school setting and how teachers’ understanding of the complexities of the school might be employed to meet the goals of the organization.

A key component of Distributed Leadership Theory that was applied to the study is the notion of leadership as a group activity. As Sergiovanni (2007) suggests, “Viewing leadership as a group activity linked to a practice rather than just an individual activity

linked to a person helps match the expertise we have in a school with the problems and situations we face” (p. 115). Within the PLC, the group examined and discussed when and how teachers at ABCES assume the position of leader and how these actions impact the organization as a whole.

Brief Overview of Methodology

Using a qualitative case study design, the aim of this action research was to increase understanding among a group of early career teachers about the meaning and practice of teacher leadership. The teacher participants came together in a PLC to explore the concept of teacher leadership. Prior to the start of the intervention, the participants completed a self-assessment asking them to rate their understanding of different topics related to leadership within the school setting using a Likert-type scale. In addition, the pre-assessment included structured interview questions about the characteristics of teacher leaders, the work they do in the school, necessary conditions for success, and their experience with shared decision-making.

The PLC met over the course of eight weeks and was grounded in selected passages from three texts that address topics related to teacher leadership. Chapters One and Four from *Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Helping Teachers Develop as Leaders* (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009) introduced dimensions of teacher leadership, examined how teacher leadership relates to collaborative practices, and explored the importance of self-awareness. Chapters One and Four from *Adventures in Teacher Leadership: Pathways, Strategies, and Inspiration for Every Teacher* (Mieliwocki & Fatheree, 2019) advanced the conversation about communication with colleagues and the importance of using data to ground conversations to improve professional practices. And lastly,

Chapters Two and Five from *Leading in Sync: Teacher Leaders and Principals Working Together for Student Learning* (Berg, 2018) anchored the discussion on the importance of a shared vision and the role of professional trust to leadership.

Teachers in the PLC met weekly to engage in discussion, reflection, support, and fellowship around the assigned readings. Teachers responded to the readings and weekly discussions in a reflective journal that was shared electronically with me, as the principal-researcher. Moreover, the journal entries were coded concurrently to the study group to further inform discussion prompts and the selection of supplemental reading material. Within this process, as a participant observer, I took field notes during interactions and observations of the teachers in the group setting.

Lastly, the participants completed a post-intervention self-assessment to measure the impact of the book study group on their understanding of the meaning and practice of teacher leadership. Like the pre-test, the post-assessment asked participants to rate their understanding on a Likert-type scale, which included questions specific to ABCES leadership structures, traditions, and contextual influences.

The book group participants engaged in this work within the context of ABCES, where they are teachers. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest, “A case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 37). The participants in this study were early career teachers who had six or fewer years’ experience in the classroom. The phenomenon examined by this study, teacher leadership skills, are developed within a bounded system, which in this study was the unique context of ABCES. Yin (2014), as referenced by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), refers to a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) within its real-life context,

especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be evident” (p. 38). The dimensions, skills, and attitudes toward teacher leadership that were addressed through the PLC are formed and influenced by the environment in which they are developed; isolating the phenomenon from the context in this case would have been extremely difficult.

Significance of the Study

According to Leithwood et al. (2004), “Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school” (p. 5). Teacher leaders, therefore, are positioned to create democratic spaces for all students in which voices are heard, lived experiences are honored, and cultural considerations are made (Emdin, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Indeed, Parrett and Budge (2012) state that leadership is the key to improving learning outcomes for schools in high-poverty/low-performing schools.

If ABCES can establish a culture in which teachers are empowered to contribute their voice and experiences through distributed leadership, then it is likely that student learning would be positively impacted (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Smylie and Eckert (2018) suggest, “The effects of teacher leadership practice on other teachers’ trust and collaboration may create new, more supportive conditions for expanding leadership” (p. 563). Certainly, increasing the spheres of influence will expand the reach of teachers who are typically solitary or insulated practitioners (Harrison Berg, 2018).

Smylie and Eckert (2018) claim that “to be effective, leadership development must be pursued by the organization and for the organization. It must be part of the organization” (p. 559). The context of the study was unique and thus provided an

opportunity to contribute new understanding to the body of work on how early career teachers understand the meaning and practice of teacher leadership. The study sought to further comprehend how the dimensions of teacher leadership are informed, shaped, and limited by a specific context.

Summary of the Findings

Teacher leadership is a dynamic, multifaceted construct that is influenced by the context and culture of the school. Three themes emerged from the data analysis as critical to successful teacher leadership. The first theme emphasizes effective communication as foundational to an effective team process. The second theme features dimensions of professional trust. Trust moderates the working relationships between teachers and, ultimately, the productivity of a team. Lastly, effective teacher leadership requires the participation and contributions of those being led – the followers – to meet the goals of the organization.

Positionality

As the school principal and practitioner-researcher gathering data for this study, my positionality was multi-dimensional. The participants of this study were trusted teachers, team members, and collaborative professionals who were critical to the success of the organization. I depend on the teachers at our school to carry out its mission, vision, and goals. ABCES is a Title 1 school, where 82% of the students are students of color and 51% are English language learners (Virginia Department of Education, 2020)). Central to our mission and vision is equity of opportunity, respect for differences, and justice for all. My position as principal of ABCES demanded that, through this action

research study, I would seek to understand the dimensions of teacher leadership that would support and forward the agenda of equity for students in our school setting.

Our school has a traditional, hierarchically organized leadership structure. By engaging in this study, my aim was to increase understanding among early career teachers about the meaning and practice of teacher leadership and to expand the number of staff who engage in decision-making. This process was disruptive to some of the norms and cultural practices within the organization. The PLC served as an intensive professional development opportunity for the participants. However, it also provided me with the opportunity to learn alongside members of my staff about their vision for our school.

There was a concerted effort to disarm the power imbalance that is inherent in the relationship between the principal and teachers. During the PLC, we used first names and met after contract hours. The culture of the school is collaborative and has already nurtured positive, respectful, and professional relationships among faculty and staff. I firmly believe that the school culture provided a solid foundation that sustained the efforts of the PLC to engage in this work effectively and with positive outcomes.

Dissertation Overview

Following Chapter One and the introduction and overview of the study, Chapter Two will present a review of the literature addressing teacher leadership. The topics explored will include the Theory of Action for Teacher Leadership and Distributed Leadership Theory. The literature review will inform the discussion on the characteristics of teacher leaders, teacher leadership stance, obstacles to effective leadership, and the impact of teacher attrition on equity for students in high-poverty schools.

Chapter Three will present the methodology for the study, specifically how the book study group was executed in the local education setting of ABCES. This chapter will document how the participants were selected as well as the process of data collection and analysis.

Chapter Four of this dissertation will present the results and findings of the PLC and the action research study. This chapter will discuss the process for data analysis and the three themes that emerged as a result of the data analysis: communication, professional trust, and the culture of contribution.

Finally, Chapter Five will discuss the implication of the findings and, importantly, provide a recommendation for subsequent steps. Because this action research study was completed in a specific context with the goal of addressing the problem of practice, Chapter Five will also include recommended action steps for addressing the problem of practice within the local school setting.

Definitions of Terms

After critically thinking about and reviewing the literature, it was determined that the following definitions would be applied when using the terms related to the research question.

1. **Professional Learning Communities (PLC)** – A group of educators working together to construct new meaning around a topic of study relevant to their work in a specific setting. This study adhered to the term as described by DuFour et al. (2016), “An ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (p. 10). The PLC featured in this action research study

included assigned readings relevant to the topic of teacher leadership and weekly discussion sessions.

2. **Teacher Leadership** – Building professional relationships that encourage others to engage deeply with the work of education; leveraging influence formally and informally across the organization to solve problems; utilizing teacher voice to advocate for all students; and participation in shared decision-making processes where the collective goal is the improvement of the school organization as a whole.
3. **Early Career Teachers** – Those with one to six years’ experience in the classroom (Buchanan et al., 2013; Ewing & Manuel, 2005; Mansfield et al., 2013). At ABCES, teachers spend the first three years of their career in a probationary period before transitioning to a continuing contract status.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Leadership is a nebulous idea and, in the last 120 years, many have attempted to define or create a conceptual model to encompass the scope and sequence of leadership (Gumus et al., 2018; Northouse, 2019; Rost, 1993). As the United States and other countries evolved through the industrial revolution and the recovery of business culture, research separated the managerial behaviors of those placed in a corporate hierarchy from practices related to leadership (Northouse, 2019; Rost, 1993). Northouse (2019) notes a consensus in the literature that “leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group...to achieve a common goal” (p. 5). Initial goals for educational systems were defined by the social constructs of formal education in the industrial age (Robinson, 2010; Steel & Craig, 2016). But in a post-industrial education system, leadership in schools needed to reflect the democratic ideals of shared decision-making and a professional focus on teaching and learning (Gumas et al., 2018). Teacher leadership emerged as a powerful force to confront ineffective systems and improve student outcomes in the age of accountability (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009).

This chapter will explore the emergence and definitions of teacher leadership. Additionally, the chapter will examine extant research about attrition in high-poverty schools, like the setting of the current study, and the impact teachers leaving the school can have on leadership experience. Moreover, Chapter Two will investigate the dispositions, personal characteristics, and organizational structures that support effective

leadership as well as why some teachers resist the leadership of others. The systematic development of leadership will be examined from two perspectives: the development of the individual as a leader, and the development of the organization to support leadership. Lastly, Chapter Two will discuss the impact of teacher leadership on student learning.

Emergence of Teacher Leadership: Historical Perspectives

The process of business management was emphasized by Fredrick Winslow Taylor's "scientific management theory," which was the dominant ideology of the early 20th century and had a major influence on the structure of schools such that it is still evident more than 100 years later in the form of bureaucratically ordered organizational charts (Gumas et al., 2018, p. 28). Throughout the 1980s, school organizational charts and reporting processes reflected the hierarchical structures observed by Taylor with teacher leaders serving in an authoritarian capacity in roles such as content specialists, department chairpersons, or grade-level leaders (Gumas et al., 2018; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Steel and Craig (2016) note that the approach to education, and higher levels of educational management, were influenced by the assembly lines of the industrial age, meaning that "the chief responsibility of these instructional leaders [was] to ensure that the educational machine [continued] to function smoothly" (p. 83).

The 1990s was accompanied by a rise in shared leadership theory and more democratic processes in the school setting, ushering in a new phase in the evolution of teacher leadership (Gumas et al., 2018). As responsibilities for instructional leadership were decentralized, the role of the teacher transitioned from that of an isolated, self-contained instructor to that of a collaborative decision-maker providing and accepting

instructional support and coaching in service of organizational improvement (DuFour et al., 2016; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Poekert et al., 2016; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Teacher leadership roles have changed over the course of the last 40 years in response to legislative demands and accountability efforts (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Poekert et al., 2016; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). With the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2001), accountability measures calling for school reform pressured schools to improve practices school-wide (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Poekert et al., 2016). The subsequent reauthorization of the act through the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 provided some flexibility for schools in meeting the restrictive requirements of NCLB but maintained a focus on underperforming schools in neighborhoods impacted by poverty (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). These legislative actions compelled school administrators to look to teachers to provide instructional leadership for their colleagues as the collective expertise of the staff was needed to meet organizational goals (DuFour et al., 2016; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Poekert et al., 2016).

However, teachers leave high-poverty schools at a higher rate than their suburban counterparts (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Parrett & Budge, 2012). Students and families in high-poverty schools can require significant academic and social-emotional support, and teachers need to feel prepared and supported by their leadership in this dimension of their work. Teachers who have left high-poverty schools have reported that they did so because of ineffective leadership and lack of support from colleagues (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Parrett & Budge, 2012). Therefore, as accountability requirements and a focus on student achievement in high-poverty schools have increased, teacher attrition

has become another obstacle to consistent, supportive teacher leadership and student achievement (Goldring et al., 2014; Podolsky et al., 2016).

A Definition of Teacher Leadership

There is little consensus in the research of the definition of teacher leadership, but there are thematic similarities that fall into two overarching categories: operational tasks and personal characteristics (Hunzicker, 2017a; Smulyan, 2016; Von Dohlen & Karvonen; 2018; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). But the work of a teacher leader is rarely neatly compartmentalized; teacher leadership entails a complex interaction between content knowledge, relationship skills, strong ethics, highly developed domains of self-concept, and grit within a dynamic school context (Smylie & Eckert, 2018).

Harrison Berg (2018) suggests that teacher leaders exercise influence throughout their practice and across settings over the course of the school day. Likewise, others see teacher leadership in the development of strong relationships with colleagues as they work together toward a common goal (Lambert, 2005; Van Dohlen & Karvonen, 2018). Finally, Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) offer their definition of teacher leaders as those who “lead within and beyond the classroom; identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders; influence others toward improved educational practice; and accept responsibility for achieving the outcomes of their leadership” (p. 11).

An Issue of Equity: The Impact of Teacher Attrition on High-Poverty Schools

Teacher shortages are sweeping the nation and disproportionately impacting impoverished students and students of color (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Ingersoll et al., 2018). Garcia and Weiss (2019) report:

The teacher shortage is real, large and growing, and worse than we thought. When indicators of teacher quality (certification, relevant training, experience, etc.) are taken into account, the shortage is even more acute than currently estimated, with high-poverty schools suffering the most from the shortage of credentialed teachers. (p. 1)

A review of the 2012-2013 Teacher Follow-up Survey (TFS) sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) revealed that teachers who left public education were white, less than 30 years old, and female, and that the majority were early childhood or primary grade teachers from schools with high rates of poverty (Goldring et al., 2014). Podolsky et al. (2016) report that in SY2012-2013, “almost one in 10 teachers in high poverty public schools left the profession” (p. 19).

Teachers report leaving schools for a variety of reasons, including lack of support by administration, priorities that are not learning-centered, lack of professional development, and lack of influence in making key academic decisions (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Holmes et al., 2019; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Teacher attrition creates a school environment with inconsistent instructional practices from one classroom to another. While there may exist some isolated examples of excellence in teaching, the majority of the staff remain chronically engaged in the early stages of team building and effective collaboration (Parrett & Budge, 2012). DuFour et al. (2016) emphasize the importance of cohesive team functioning to the improvement of school-wide student learning. It is difficult to build cohesive instructional programs and teams that successfully meet the needs of all students when they are forced to reconstitute every school year. As Ingersoll et al. (2019) report, “The data show there is an annual

asymmetric reshuffling of significant numbers of employed teachers from poor to not-poor schools, from high-minority to low-minority schools, and from urban to suburban schools” (p. 18). Teacher attrition in high-poverty schools results in instructional teams that must reinvent themselves year to year; they have to reestablish norms, rebuild supportive collegial relationships, and revisit the same instructional conversations related to student learning and germane to the school community.

Parrett and Budge (2012) conclude, “The revolving door often found in low-performing high poverty schools clearly perpetuates low student achievement” (p. 76). Importantly, teachers are not “fleeing their students” when they leave high-poverty schools; rather, they are leaving a school culture that does not sustain them as they engage in the work necessary to maintain quality instructional programming in high-poverty schools (Simon & Johnson, 2015, p. 1). The social working conditions characterized by effective teaming, quality leadership, and supportive collegial relationships are key to retaining teachers, and building capacity, at high-poverty schools (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Simon & Johnson, 2015, p. 1).

Dispositions, Personal Characteristics, and Qualities of Teacher Leaders

The Theory of Action for Teacher Leadership Conceptual Model proposed by York-Barr and Duke (2004) serves as part of the theoretical framework for this action research study. Their model suggests three foundational elements that should be targeted by development efforts when seeking to strengthen the practice of teacher leadership (see Figure 1.2). The first of those elements features individual leadership capacities and stance. Importantly, as part of these personal orientations and values, York-Barr and Duke argue that teacher leaders must be learning focused (p. 290).

Teachers who emerge as leaders from a collaborative school community exhibit common personal qualities and characteristics (Hunzicker, 2017a; Katezenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Melville, 2016; Smulyan, 2016; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Qualities like persistence and a moral commitment to social justice allow teacher leaders to stand firm when faced with resistance by colleagues (Evans, 1996; Katezenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Smulyan, 2016; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Interpersonal communication competencies related to building and sustaining relationships, strong communication, and establishing trust are “particularly conducive to effective leadership” (Smylie & Eckert, 2018, p. 564). Finally, values related to professional trust, such as honesty, integrity, and care, are consistently identified across the extant research as essential for teacher leadership (Berg, 2018; Bezzina & Bufalino, 2019; Hunzicker, 2017a; Lumpkin et al., 2014; Wenner & Campbell, 2017).

The literature exposes two pathways or personal approaches to teacher leadership, which is succinctly defined by Wenner and Campbell (2017) as “thick and thin teacher leadership identity” (p. 12). Thin leadership identity is operationally focused and task-driven, whereas a thick leadership identity is fed by a passionate commitment to the work and engagement in service to the community (Wenner & Campbell, 2017, p. 12). Likewise, Northouse (2018) compares the work of managers who maintain order to that of leaders who establish goals and motivate people. Additionally, these differences have been related as technical and adaptive leadership wherein technical leadership makes operational changes within existing school structures but adaptive leadership can lead to changes that “alter existing values and norms in an organization” (Daly & Chrispeels, 2008, p. 30).

Daly and Chrispeels (2008) suggest that adaptive, or thick, leadership is critical to improving student learning and closing learning gaps for all students. Teachers who demonstrate the qualities of a thick leadership identity are able to motivate their colleagues, rise above the educational rhetoric, and remain focused on student learning (Katezenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Smulyan, 2016; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). To achieve a sustained focus on school improvement and student learning, Smylie and Eckert (2018) conclude that “leadership will need to favor democratic, inclusive, and participative practices” (p. 563). PLCs provide school teams and teacher leaders with a structure to develop instructional practices that can effectively address student learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; DuFour et al., 2016; Hunzicker, 2012).

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

Key to the theoretical framework of this study is an examination of the conditions that support and sustain the practice of teacher leadership. The Theory of Action for Teacher Leadership Conceptual Model (see Figure 1.2; York-Barr & Duke, 2004) includes a supportive culture as foundational and necessary for teacher leadership that results in student learning. They concluded that teacher leaders influence collaborative teams and groups to improve teaching practices with the aim of increasing student learning outcomes. According to York-Barr and Duke (2004), a supportive culture for teacher leadership includes professional discourse, sharing resources, and time to perform the work. Each of these elements are present in professional learning communities (PLCs) (Dufour et.al., 2016).

Creating a culture that fosters teacher leadership requires school organizations to move away from hierarchical and egalitarian decision-making structures to assigning

leadership positions based on years of experience in the classroom (Donaldson et al., 2008; Harrison Berg, 2018; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Senge et al., 2012; Smulyan, 2016). Schaap and Bruijn (2018) define five elements, or conditions, that would support such a shift in culture: “shared values and norms, clear and consistent focus on student learning, deprivatization of practices, and a focus on collaboration and reflective dialogues” (p. 110). PLCs are an effective model for establishing democratic spaces in which all team members feel empowered to contribute to instructional conversations and participate in decision-making (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Moreover, the establishment of effective PLCs can dramatically impact student achievement and are directly linked with long-term increases in student learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; DuFour et al., 2016; Hunzicker, 2012). The metrics used to evidence this correlation include matriculation rates, student absenteeism, and student achievement in the core content areas of reading, math, science, and history (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Fostering PLCs in which teachers can work together to identify and address systemic needs is the role of the school administration, which rather than identifying teachers with prerequisite leadership skills, should instead seek to create an environment “that evokes leadership from all teachers” (DuFour et al., 2016; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Lumpkin et al., 2014, p. 61). Engaging in collaboration and discourse about teaching practices and student learning outcomes using a PLC model provides teachers with the opportunity to engage in small-scale leadership (Hunzicker, 2017a). Harrison Berg (2018) suggests that developing leadership skills in early career teachers will have a significant impact on the culture of the school. She concludes, “As teacher/leaders work

together, they learn about each other's strengths and grow to complement each other's skills. As they do so, they create the kind of work environment in which all members of the community are valued, challenged, and inspired" (p. 137).

Environmental factors that encourage teacher leadership development include structural supports that provide the time and space for collaboration and organizational values that promote collective decision-making (Berg, 2018; DuFour et al., 2016; Evans, 1996; Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Lumpkin et al., 2014). Master scheduling that provides concurrent planning for teachers who serve the same students or teach the same content is key to sustaining collaborative relationships. Creating a shared vision for school-wide priorities related to student learning and culture is essential to building a strong foundation for healthy PLCs (Berg, 2018; DuFour et al., 2016).

Central to the success of creating a PLC, and arguably the culture and climate of the school, is transparency of the process and role clarity for the teacher leader within the instructional teams and organization (Berg, 2018; Lumpkin et al., 2014). Defining how the work of the team will be facilitated, what structures will be in place for decision-making, and how the work of the team will be reported to school administration, are essential to success (Berg, 2018; DuFour et al., 2016; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). Likewise, distributed leadership practices must be transparent and the responsibilities of all PLC members for participation must be clearly outlined (DuFour et al., 2016). Lastly, strengthening professional trust is vital to providing an environment in which new leaders can step forward and all teachers can take the professional and emotional risks necessary to change (Berg, 2018).

Book Club PLC Design. Addressing cultural change in a school is not an easy task because of the connectedness of operational structures to values and beliefs (Evans, 1996; Senge et al., 2012). Evans (1996) urges leaders to remember that “social structures are embedded in systems of meaning, value, belief, and knowledge; such systems compromise the culture of an organization” (p. 17). One way to begin a shift in thinking for PLCs is the practice of shared reading and discourse about a particular topic or problem of practice. Members who engage in this type of professional learning “negotiate meaning, develop their thoughts, and internalize the voices of other members” (Kooy, 2006, p. 663). Smulyan (2016) finds that reading and talking about common experiences with early career teachers is an effective way to help them “recognize the long-term commitment to and complexity of teacher leadership” (p. 18). Book club design encourages participants to engage in professional learning in a social context where members can build relationships, establish trust, and safely explore professional vulnerabilities (Kooy, 2006; Mensah, 2009).

Obstacles to Effective Teacher Leadership

Resistance to change is rooted in loss and grief, and teacher leaders who seek to influence the established instructional habits of their colleagues must understand the emotional attachment others feel toward their established practice (Donaldson et al., 2008; Evans, 1996; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). Three constructs emerge from the literature as contributing to teacher resistance to change and, by association, emerging teacher leaders: autonomy, egalitarianism, and years of experience (Donaldson et al., 2008; Evans, 1996; Hunzicker, 2017a; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009).

Autonomy. The construct of autonomy is fiercely guarded, deeply entrenched, and reveals itself in multiple areas of the extant research. Teachers who are asked to implement change, to adjust, or otherwise to abandon established instructional habits can experience feelings of grief, loss, resentment, and guilt (Donaldson et al., 2008; Evans, 1996; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). Donaldson et al. (2008) reports that some teachers refuse “actively or passively, to change their practice, thus defending their autonomy” (p. 1096). When asked to embrace new professional learning or shift perspectives based on student needs, experienced teachers can feel stressed, confused, or incompetent (Evans, 1996). The results can be devastating when the assumptions teachers have about their practice are contradicted by the organization; when teachers feel their practices and values are no longer aligned with the organization, this realization can shake foundational self-efficacy (Evans, 1996; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016). As Evans (1996) notes, “Virtually nothing is more painful or more threatening to our basic security, our very ability to understand and cope with things. It is natural that we should vigorously avoid and resist such experiences” (p. 29).

Egalitarianism and Seniority. An environment that fosters distributed leadership directly challenges the construct of egalitarianism within the school setting or instructional group; that is, the principle or belief that all members are equal and should have the same opportunities (Cheung et al., 2018; Donaldson et al., 2008; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). This is because “egalitarian norms among teachers do not encourage a teacher to take on leadership roles. These norms respect the privacy of other teachers, and the consequence of violating this expectation may be to suffer rejection from peers” (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009, p. 91). Some teachers question the appropriateness of

another teacher insinuating they are experts over their colleagues in any given subject matter, while others view teacher leaders with suspicion and resentment for perceived privileges and access to decision-making (Cheung et al., 2018; Donaldson et al., 2008). Additionally, teachers with more experience in the classroom question teacher leaders who have less experience in the field of education but nonetheless serve in a leadership capacity (Donaldson et al., 2008).

Typical responses to resistance by teacher leaders include pulling back from conflict, lessening expectations, and shutting down communication, resulting in ineffective and inoperable teams (Donaldson et al., 2008; Smulyan, 2016; Von Dohlen & Karvonen, 2018). Evans (1996) cautions that leaders who are focused on improvement can become “swept up in the urgency of a problem and the promise of a solution, they can overlook and underestimate the effort and agony of the people who must adapt” (p. 38).

Systematic Development of Teacher Leaders

If teacher leadership is a pathway to teacher retention (Simon & Johnson, 2015), has a positive impact on student learning (York-Barr & Duke, 2004), and increases collaboration that results in high-quality teaching practices (Berg, 2018; Smylie & Eckert, 2018), then educational organizations must foster teacher leadership (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). York-Barr and Duke (2004) included three foundational elements as part of their Theory of Action for Teacher Leadership Conceptual Model that serves as a theoretical framework for current action research study. They suggest attending to the needs and development of the leader as an individual as well as the organizational conditions to support that leader are critical to effective teacher leadership.

Similar to the way teaching practices are improved through professional development, Von Dohlen and Karvonen (2018) suggest that “teachers must be trained to lead” (p. 73). Studies in teacher leadership examine development from two different perspectives: person- or leader-focused and organization- or systems-focused.

Person/Leader-Focused Research. Person/leader-focused research—that is, research that focuses on building the capacities of the leader—emphasizes the characteristics or dispositions needed for teachers to move from teacher to teacher leaders (Hunzicker, 2012; Hunzicker, 2017a; Melville, 2016; Smulyan, 2016; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). The studies referenced in this review discuss the personal orientation prerequisite for leadership and include themes such as ethics and a commitment to service beyond the classroom. Grit, described as *positive persistence* and defined by Duckworth et al. (2007) as “perseverance and passion for long term goals,” is a defining attribute of teacher leaders (p. 1087). Additionally, empathy and care are recurring qualities identified as essential to teacher leaders (Hunzicker, 2017a).

The literature suggests that teacher leaders share common beliefs, values, and dispositions toward organizational improvement inside and out of their classroom (Carver, 2016; Hunzicker, 2017a; Melville, 2016; Smulyan, 2016). Beliefs and dispositions about teacher leadership found throughout the literature include *teaching is vocation*, which values continuous improvement and growth, *teaching is a political action*, which creates agency for civic engagement in social justice, and *teaching is a collaborative process*, for leveraging the power of a group of professionals to improve learning for all students (DuFour et al., 2016; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Parrett & Budge, 2012; Smulyan, 2016; Senge et al., 2012; Smulyan, 2016). Development

activities emphasize increasing leadership identity, self-perception, and self-efficacy over time as a way to strengthen positionality when providing support for colleagues within the school context (Carver, 2016; Hunzicker, 2012; Hunzicker, 2017a). This strengthening of personal stance allows teacher leaders to challenge norms, endorse equitable practices, and engage others in thinking differently about teaching and learning (Melville, 2016; Smulyan, 2016; Wenner & Campbell, 2017).

Self-reflection and awareness of formal and informal leadership behaviors are central to the development activities described in the literature (Ado, 2016; Carver, 2016; Hunzicker, 2017a; Smulyan, 2016). Development programs include engaging in small-group cohort discussion groups using a book study and selected readings to prompt discourse and reflection (Smulyan, 2016). Moreover, participants can write essays and reflections to articulate their thinking related to elements of teacher leadership and summarize their development (Ado, 2016; Smulyan, 2016).

Development programming varies in time commitment and scope depending on the goals and expected outcomes. Some workshops can be one-week intensive experiences, while other cohorts can meet for as long as two years as part of an ongoing support network (Carver, 2016; Smulyan, 2016). Similarly, other developing leaders can create a portfolio to document their progress and introspections about their emerging leadership stance over time (Hunzicker, 2012). Job-embedded professional development to increase a school-wide leadership mindset, improve competencies related to instructional planning and pedagogy, and cultivate collaborative practices is reported as essential to teacher leadership development (Danielson, 2016; DuFour et al., 2016; Fiarman, 2017; Hunzicker, 2017a).

Organization-Focused Research. Organization-focused research focuses on how schools can best support the growth and development of teacher leaders from a systems approach and highlights the cultural elements, norms, and practices that should be in place to foster teacher leadership in a school setting (Ado, 2016; DuFour et al., 2016; Senge et al., 2012). As Ado (2016) suggests, “some of the contextual conditions that support teacher leadership include having an environment where trust is present, where dialogue can occur openly, and where there are values and vision in support of shared instructional practices” (p. 5). These contextual conditions must be germane, if not unique, to the local setting, and any change or development to address specific needs must come from inside the organization (Smylie & Eckert, 2018). Literature focused on organizational conditions that support teacher leadership is concerned with and motivated by the need for school improvement in the area of student learning and achievement (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Lumpkin et al., 2014; Smylie & Eckert, 2018).

Four essential ideas associated with effective teacher leadership echo throughout the literature: the teacher leader is focused on student learning, the teacher leader is empowered to participate in decision-making, teacher leaders develop authentic relationships with peers, and teacher leaders facilitate collaborative processes that build skills and engender trust (Berg, 2018; Danielson, 2016). Senge et al. (2012) conclude that “successful school change...requires multiple layers of leadership roles” (p. 323). Importantly, the genesis of school improvement efforts is often the innovation from classrooms of imaginative and invested teacher leaders who are eager to share success with others (Senge et al., 2012): “When people throughout a system become stewards of the children, the system, and one another, they provide context for change (p. 323). Key

to the organizational approach to leadership development is the opportunity to practice leadership through activities and experiences to aid in building capacity (Berg, 2018; Smylie & Eckert, 2018).

A Balanced Approach to Development. There is a nexus between person/leader-focused and organization-focused research where they come together to create the conditions favorable for leadership development. While there is agreement that some teachers who possess inherent characteristics are often referred to as natural leaders, the preponderance of the literature suggests that specific skills and knowledge can be developed through activities that are specific to the needs of the school in teachers who want or need to lead their colleagues (Carver, 2016; Fairman & McKenzie, 2012; Huggins et al., 2017; Hunzicker, 2012; Hunzicker, 2017b; Smulyan, 2016). Smylie and Eckert (2018) assert that “both individual and organizational factors should be considered as affecting activities and experiences that are intended to promote leadership and leadership development” (p. 561). Systematic development of teacher leaders within the context of the local setting should consider the vocational, political, and relational dimensions that inform a teacher’s stance toward leadership while creating organizational systems that will support and enhance the efforts of teacher leaders (Evans, 1996; Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012; Hunzicker, 2017a; Hunzicker, 2017b; Senge et al., 2012; Smylie & Eckert, 2018; Von Dohlen & Karvonen, 2018).

The findings included in the aforementioned research are relevant to the current study in that they demonstrate that teacher leadership can be developed in those with a strong leadership stance, one that includes a commitment to service to the community (Hunzicker, 2017a; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Smylie & Eckert, 2018; Von Dohlen

& Karvonen, 2018). By providing environmental conditions that are thoughtfully prepared to support the developing teacher leaders, including professional development and leadership opportunities, schools can activate teacher leadership in those who have the desire but have not yet built the capacity to lead (Berg, 2018; Cheung et al., 2018; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). This development cannot happen alone or in a vacuum; collaboration is the gateway to teacher leadership, and only by working together can these competencies be developed in the context of the team environment, where the influence on the practice of other teachers can be realized (Berg, 2018; Cheung et al., 2018; DuFour et al., 2016; Hunzicker, 2017b).

Teacher Leadership and Student Achievement

Improved student learning and achievement are often the catalyst for implementing organizational changes that encourage, or even rely on, effective teacher leadership (Allen & Blythe, 2018; DuFour et al., 2016; Ingersoll et al., 2018; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009): “Teacher leadership and the amount of teacher influence in school decision making are independently and significantly related to student achievement” (Ingersoll et al., 2018, p. 16). The Theory of Action for Teacher Leadership Conceptual Model (see Figure 1.2) that serves as part of the theoretical framework for this study emphasizes student learning as the aim, indeed the sole purpose of improving teacher leader capacity and fostering organizational conditions to support their work (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

The single most mentioned teacher leadership activity in the literature is collaboration; indeed, teacher leaders facilitating professional learning about planning and pedagogy and moderating the discourse about student progress are identified as key

points of influence (Allen & Blythe, 2018; Berg, 2018; Danielson, 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Lumpkin et al., 2014). Danielson (2015), in *The Framework for Teaching*, states that “professional conversations aimed at improving teaching practice are a particularly important type of communication, and they hold a central role within schools” (p. 1). When instructional teams focus on all students, they develop a collective ownership of student learning (DuFour et al., 2016). The role of the teacher leader is to facilitate group processes that support and foster a shared responsibility for student outcomes (Berg, 2018; Danielson, 2015; Lumpkin et al., 2014).

Instructional reforms often rely on the capacity of teacher teams to implement new initiatives and assimilate new instructional practices into existing school structures and norms (Cheung, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; DuFour et al., 2016; Senge et al., 2012). However, this can be a contentious position for teacher leaders when they meet with resistance to school improvement efforts, and school principals must anticipate challenge points and respond with support (Fiarman, 2017): “If we want to harness the expertise of our staff members and deepen their engagement in school improvement, we have to deliberately build their capacity to lead” (p. 24). Leadership development for teachers who lead collaborative conversations that will improve learning outcomes for all students is a critical focus point and a keystone for overall organizational improvements (DuFour et al., 2016; Smylie & Eckert, 2018; Von Dolen & Karvonen, 2018).

Summary

Teacher leadership, for the purposes of this study, is defined as engaging in professional relationships that inspire others to connect deeply with the work of education, engage with groups across the organization, and participate in shared decision-

making processes where the collective goal is the improvement of the school organization as a whole. Teacher leadership roles can be formal or informal and performed by those with the motivation to help the organization improve (Berg, 2018; Von Dohlen & Karvonen, 2018). Traditionally, teacher leadership roles have been filled by those with many years of experience in the classroom (Donaldson et al., 2008; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). But in schools that experience high levels of teacher turnover, teachers are called to lead earlier in their careers (Ado, 2016; Goldring et al., 2014). The literature review found that early career teachers can strengthen their capacity to lead their peers when schools provide systematic, context-specific exposure to research-based practices and opportunities to practice instructional leadership (Ado, 2016; Huggins, 2017; Hunzicker, 2017b; Smylie & Eckert, 2018; Von Dohlen & Karvonen, 2018).

Teacher leadership is a powerful force that can be leveraged to improve instructional practices, school culture, and learning outcomes for students (DuFour et al., 2016; Ingersoll et al., 2018; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). Teacher leadership has a significant influence over the day-to-day learning experiences of students in all classrooms because of the access and professional relationships teachers share with each other when working in PLCs (Berg, 2018; DuFour et al., 2016). These types of structures provide multiple opportunities to exercise influence over their peers, to share best practices, and to facilitate ongoing professional learning (Berg, 2018; DuFour et al., 2016; Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012; Lumpkin et al., 2014). However, not all teachers are willing to be led by those who they perceive as having less experience and more access to decision-making, and as rejecting the established and beloved teaching practices valued

in the past (Evans, 1996; Donaldson et al., 2008). School principals are positioned to provide structures, opportunities, and resources that create the conditions whereby teacher leadership is able to develop (Ado, 2016; Danielson, 2016; DuFour et al., 2016; Senge et al., 2012).

CHAPTER THREE

ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Teacher leaders in the school setting are often charged with organizational tasks and administrative duties to keep the operations of the organization moving forward. However, teacher leadership that positively impacts student learning outcomes is complex and involves leveraging influence, building relationships, and engendering trust with colleagues (Harrison Berg, 2018). The problem of practice at ABCES and explained in this action research study is the seemingly limited understanding early career teachers at ABCES have about the multi-dimensional nature of teacher leadership, the complex role teacher leaders have within our school, and how teacher leaders can influence learning and achievement for all students.

Research Question

What impact will a professional learning community (PLC) have on 10 early career teachers who seek to understand the meaning and practice of teacher leadership?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of a professional learning community (PLC) on 10 early career teachers who seek to understand the meaning and practice of teacher leadership.

Action Research Design

Using a qualitative case study design, this work sought to explore the level of understanding a group of teachers has about the meaning and practice of teacher leadership. The group engaged in this work together as members of a PLC within the context of ABCES. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) define a case study as “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 37). The phenomenon examined by this study, teacher leadership, is developed within a bounded system—in this study, the unique context of ABCES—where all participants are members of the instructional staff. Yin (2014), as referenced by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), refers to a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be evident” (p. 38). The understanding and knowledge of teacher leadership that were explored through the PLC are formed and influenced by the environment in which they are developed; isolating the phenomenon from the context in this case would have been extremely difficult.

A variety of qualitative sources were utilized to triangulate the data and strengthen the conclusions made about any changes to understanding the participants had in relation to teacher leadership, including Likert scales, structured interview questions, journals, and observational field notes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The data were analyzed concurrently with the study so that emerging questions or concepts could be addressed using supplemental reading material or discussion prompts. The practitioner-researcher synthesized the data and determined whether the book study improved the participants’ understanding of issues related to teacher leadership.

Setting and Time Frame

The practitioner-researcher and participants work as educators in a suburban city school district where 82% of students belong to a minority racial group and 55% are economically disadvantaged (Virginia Department of Education, 2020). The teachers participating in the PLC were part of the instructional staff of ABCES; one of five elementary schools in the district. The study was conducted in the fall of 2020.

The participants and researcher met on Thursday afternoons from 4:30 p.m.–5:30 p.m. for eight weeks. The study began on September 24, 2020 and concluded on November 12, 2020. The PLC incorporated a book study process and engaged in discussions about the assigned reading and guiding questions.

The global COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted education in the United States for SY2020-2021, certainly including ABCES. The PLC discussion sessions were held in a hybrid format of in-person and synchronous communication using Zoom. Participants chose how they were most comfortable attending the weekly sessions.

Participants

The participants of this case study were selected from members of the instructional teaching staff at ABCES. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) write that nonprobability sampling is the preferred method for qualitative research because it is appropriate for answering research questions that seek to understand the implications of a specific phenomenon. This action research design used purposeful sampling for selecting the site and the participant sample for the PLC.

The site, ABC Elementary School (ABCES), was selected because I am the principal and, as the participant-researcher, I had access and autonomy to operate a study

that focuses on the improvement of this school. As the leader of this school and organization, I naturally have an interest in improving the organizational functions that will increase student learning. My position as principal obviously compels me to make decisions that are in the best interest of all students. To that end, my position as the practitioner-researcher provided me with the opportunity to deeply explore the construct of teacher leadership within the school setting as a possible vehicle for improving learning outcomes for all students.

There are 41 licensed teachers working as the instructional staff to serve 643 ABCES students. The participants for this study were selected from that group of teachers. The teachers selected for the study are typical of those professionals found across our community. Their experience, education, licensing requirements, and professional environments are consistent with those found in our district, in the neighboring counties, and in our region of the state.

Criteria for Selection. Participants were identified using the following criteria:

1. Must hold a VA teaching license
2. Must be currently employed as a teacher at ABCES
3. Must have more than one full year of experience in the ABCES organization
4. Must volunteer to participate

Participant Descriptions.

- Candace is a kindergarten teacher at ABCES elementary school with six years' classroom teaching experience and is currently serving in a formal leadership role.
- Bethany is a kindergarten teacher at ABCES elementary school with two years' classroom teaching experience and has not served in a formal leadership role.

- Megan is a second-grade teacher at ABCES elementary school with seven years' classroom teaching experience and has served in a formal leadership role at a previous school setting.
- Stephanie is a first-grade teacher at ABCES elementary school with two years' classroom teaching experience and has not served in a formal leadership role.
- Amie is a fourth-grade teacher at ABCES elementary school with two years' classroom teaching experience and has not served in a formal leadership role.
- Reese is a third-grade teacher at ABCES elementary school with six years' classroom teaching experience and is currently serving in a formal leadership role.
- Dawn is a kindergarten teacher at ABCES elementary school with four years' classroom teaching experience and has not served in a formal leadership role.
- Gina is a first-grade teacher at ABCES elementary school with five years' classroom teaching experience and is currently serving in a formal leadership role.
- Anita is a third-grade teacher at ABCES elementary school with three years' classroom teaching experience and has not served in a formal leadership role.
- Jordan is a first-grade teacher at ABCES elementary school with two years' classroom teaching experience and has not served in a formal leadership role.

Research Methods

The participants responded to pre- and post-self-assessments and pre- and post-structured interview questions, participated in group discussion about the assigned book chapters, and provided reflective responses in a journal once a week for eight weeks. These activities provided data to determine what impact the PLC had on participants' understanding of the meaning and practice of teacher leadership. Merriam and Tisdell

(2016) suggest collecting data to a point of saturation; that is, to the point at which respondents' answers become repetitive. A group size of 10 participants allowed these teachers to engage with the material in a dialogic format and to create deeper connections to and more capacity with the concepts introduced by the text and other readings.

Triangulation of the data was one way to ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the study: "Using multiple sources of data means comparing and cross-checking data collected through observations at different times or in different places, or interview data collected from people with different perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 245). Participant response data for this study were collected using different methods: pre- and post-Likert scales, pre- and post- structured interview questions, and weekly reflection journal entries. All data were shared with the practitioner-researcher and analyzed concurrently.

Data Collection and Instruments

Pre- and Post-Likert scales (Appendix A). The pre- and post-study self-assessment included Likert scales for the dimensions of leadership outlined in the theoretical framework, including characteristics of teacher leaders, the work they do in the school, necessary conditions for success, spheres of influence, and experience with shared decision-making. Participants completed the self-assessment using the Google Forms application. The instrument was based, in part, on the Teacher Leader Self-Assessment instrument developed by the Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession (CSTP, 2018) as a component of their Teacher Leadership framework.

The Teacher Leader Self-Assessment instrument was developed to facilitate the self-assessment of teachers in the following areas: knowledge and skills for working with

adults, dispositions and beliefs that lead to professional trust and risk-taking, collaborative work, communication, pedagogy, systems thinking, and equity (CSTP, 2018) (Appendix A). This instrument was adapted to align with the focus topics of the PLC and covered by the selected readings. The pre- and post-Likert scale responses were collected using a Google Form and analyzed using the embedded analytics of that platform.

Pre- and Post-Structured Interview Questions (Appendix B). Structured interviews were conducted prior to and at the conclusion of the book study. The questions asked concerned teacher leadership as it relates to and is conducted within the ABCES context. Interview questions were sent and written responses were collected using the Google Forms application.

Reflective Journal Entries (Appendix C). During the eight-week PLC, participants responded to reflection prompts provided at the end of each weekly discussion. Participants submitted journal entries electronically through a Google Form shared only with the researcher. The prompts for reflection were drawn, in part, from those suggested in selected chapters of *Awakening the Sleeping Giant* (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009), *Leading in Sync* (Harrison Berg, 2018), and *Adventures in Teacher Leadership* (Mieliwocki & Fatheree, 2019). Additionally, prompts were developed by the practitioner-researcher during the course of the PLC in response to discussion topics to further encourage thinking and reflection about practices specific to ABCES.

Field Notes Observational Record (Appendix D). During and immediately after the PLC discussion sessions, the practitioner-researcher recorded field notes regarding participant responses.

Research Procedure

Prior to engaging in the PLC, the participants were asked to complete a pre-assessment of their understanding of issues related to teacher leadership. The purpose of this pre-assessment was two-fold: to gather baseline data of their current understanding related to teacher leadership, and to serve as an advance organizer, or preview, of the concepts at the center of the PLC book study process. Further, the pre-study self-assessment data served as the comparison point to the post-study self-assessment to measure change, or the *impact of the study*, as was required by the research question. The pre-assessment began the process of metacognition on the part of the respondents as to how they viewed and thought about teacher leadership in the ABCES setting. Moreover, as the practitioner-researcher of the action research study, I had to know the current state of understanding on the part of the participants in relation to the discussion topics so that the PLC could be paced and designed accordingly within the time allotted.

During the PLC, the participants responded to the selected readings and reflection prompts in a journal. The selected readings for the book study were selected from three texts:

1. *Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Helping Teachers Develop as Leaders*
(Katzenmyer & Moller, 2009)
2. *Adventures in Teacher Leadership: Pathways, Strategies, and Inspiration for Every Teacher* (Mieliwocki & Fatheree, 2019)
3. *Leading in Sync: Teacher Leaders and Principals Working Together for Student Learning* (Harrison Berg, 2018)

Marilyn Katzenmyer and Gayle Moller wrote what many consider to be the seminal work on teacher leadership, *Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Helping Teachers Develop as Leaders* (2009). They suggest that the first step on the pathway to teacher leadership is to talk about it: “Teachers benefit from conversations designed to raise their awareness about teacher leadership. This discussion is prerequisite to teachers thinking about their development as teacher leaders” (p. 14). The book study group read Chapter One, “Understanding Teacher Leadership,” from their book (pp. 1–22). The chapter introduces dimensions of teacher leadership, discusses how teacher leadership relates to collaborative practices, and provides a tool to measure teacher readiness for leadership. Additionally, the study group read, discussed, and reflected on Chapter Four, “Understanding Myself and Others as Teachers and Leaders” (pp. 65–81). The chapter explores the importance of self-awareness, the understanding of the role of personality in leadership and working with others, and the importance of diversity, and additionally provides a conceptual model for building relationships.

Rebecca Mieliwocki, 2012 Teacher of the Year for California, and Joseph Fatheree, 2007 Teacher of the Year for Illinois, wrote *Adventures in Teacher Leadership: Pathways, Strategies, and Inspiration for Every Teacher* for teachers who want to learn about important dimensions of teacher leadership (2019). The book study group read, discussed, and reflected on Chapter One, “Building Bridges: Using Communication Channels to Strengthen Ties, Create Networks, and Sustain Relationships,” of the book (pp. 5–28). This chapter was chosen because it explores the different ways in which teachers communicate within and outside of the school setting to advance student learning, the importance of building and leveraging professional relationships, and how

to recognize and avoid some pitfalls that might slow momentum. Chapter Four, “Map Reading 101: Understanding and Using Research and Data to Strengthen Your Work,” invites teachers to think critically about the work of the organization using data analysis to identify trends and possible solutions, to remove bias from decision-making, and to leverage teacher leadership to meet improvement goals (pp. 74–90).

The final text that provided guidance for the book study group was *Leading in Sync: Teacher Leaders and Principals Working Together for Student Learning* by Dr. Jill Harrison Berg (2018). The PLC read Chapter Two, “Shared Vision,” and explored their own vision of improvement, quality, and coming to consensus with others. Harrison Berg (2018) suggests that our diversity of experience requires teacher leaders to consider other perspectives:

Leadership is about setting a direction and leading others in that direction.

However, when leadership is viewed from a distributed perspective, it reminds us to consider the following question: To what extent are formal and informal leaders in this context setting the *same* direction and leading others in that *same* direction? That doesn’t happen without deliberate effort (p. 22).

Part of coming to a consensus is extending and receiving professional trust (Harrison Berg, 2018). The book study group also read Chapter Five of *Leading In Sync*, “Strengthening Trust” (pp. 93–121). The chapter reviews four dimensions of trust and suggests a model for building and strengthening trust to improve professional interactions. The chapter includes tools for analyzing existing interactions at different levels from low-risk to high-risk and identifying opportunities for self-reflection using the survey.

Lastly, the participants were asked to participate in a post-PLC structured interview. The interviews were completed at the end of the sessions and after the post-study Likert scales were complete.

Ethical Considerations

The Belmont Report requires that ethical considerations be fully addressed by research involving human subjects (OHRP, 2018). The researcher protected the autonomy of the participants by disclosing the research goals, purpose, and desired outcomes of the PLC during the consent process. Additionally, the issue of positionality to the researcher was explored and concerns expressed by the participants were addressed prior to obtaining consent. Risk to the participants was minimal. However, if responses related to delicate working relationships, feelings of vulnerability, or candid observations about the work site were disclosed to other people within our organization, there could have been some level of harm to the participants. Extra care was taken during the study to separate the responses from the identity of the participants.

The privacy of the participants and the setting was ensured through the use of pseudonyms and confidentiality procedures established at the beginning of the PLC process. Measures were taken to separate the data from any identifying information early in the process. A Google account separate from the one used by ABCES was used to store the data related to this study. The participants for this study were identified based on the relevance they had to the research question and were not considered vulnerable in this instance.

Book Study PLC Schedule

Table 3.1 *Weekly Book Study Topic and Activity Schedule*

Week	Topic	Reading	Reflective Writing Prompt
Prior to Book Study Group (BSG)	Participants will complete pre-assessment and submit interview questions		What is teacher leadership (TL)? What does this term or concept mean to you?
1	Defining TL. Who are they, how are they identified, am I ready to lead?	<i>Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Helping Teachers Develop as Leaders</i> (2009) CHAPTER ONE	Examples of TL are all around you. Consider the definition of TL created by the BSG. Provide examples you see over the next week.
2	We're all in this together: embracing diversity and uniqueness in the workplace.	<i>Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Helping Teachers Develop as Leaders</i> (2009) CHAPTER FOUR	Think about someone you have worked with who was reluctant to join in change efforts to improve teaching and learning. Use the Factors Relating to the Uniqueness of TL (Figure 4.1 from the Chapter) to reflect on this teacher. How does embracing diversity in the workplace serve the mission of equity? Use a pseudonym to protect privacy.
3	Can you hear me now? Communication is the language of leadership: creating networks and strengthening ties will all stakeholders.	<i>Adventures in Teacher Leadership: Pathways, Strategies, and Inspiration for Every Teacher</i> (2019) CHAPTER ONE	Think about your current communication loops within the building, with students, with parents, and with the community. What opportunities exist for you to strengthen your networks? How would this benefit all students? How does communication serve the mission of equity?
4	Understanding and using data to make better decisions: TL and data discussions.	<i>Adventures in Teacher Leadership: Pathways, Strategies, and Inspiration for Every</i>	Reflect on the data discussion processes you have participated in as a teacher. Were they helpful? Did your

		<i>Teacher</i> (2019) CHAPTER FOUR	conclusions lead to changing instructional practices or improve student outcomes? How do you work with other teachers and admin to identify your problem of practice? What action steps could a teacher leader take to improve the team process in the next meeting? The next quarter? The next year?
5	Compass Points Activity	This activity will help us to better understand how we and our colleagues approach work in a group setting. This increased understanding will help work together more effectively.	Think about some of the problems, conflicts, and challenges faced by teacher leaders in our building. Can you think about a particular incident where people who occupy opposing (or different) compass points needed to come to a consensus? Were they successful? What prevented or helped them succeed? How would an activity like this help a grade-level or school team leader?
6	Strengthening Trust	<i>Leading in Sync: Teacher Leaders and Principals Working Together for Student Learning</i> (2018) CHAPTER FIVE	Think about the four types of trust discussed. Refer to Figure 5.2 in the chapter. Reflect on your experience and write examples of each kind of trust that you have experienced in a positive or negative way.
7	Shared Vision	<i>Leading in Sync: Teacher Leaders and Principals Working Together for Student Learning</i> (2018) CHAPTER TWO	What actions or inactions impact the implementation of shared vision? Draft a personal vision for your school through the lens of a leader. How would you bring others to share your vision? How would you come to consensus with

			others who have a different lens?
8	Roles and Opportunities for Leadership	Ten Roles for Teacher Leaders (Harrison & Killian, 2007)	Do you see yourself here? What role or roles do you play in our school and what interpersonal communication strengths do you use to “make it happen”? Conversely, can you provide an example of some other person in our school that fills a different role? What interpersonal communication skills do they use to in this capacity?
	Participants will complete post-assessment and submit interview questions.		

Treatment, Process, and Analysis of Data

The treatment described in Chapter Three is a PLC with a book study group as the focus for the 10 teachers selected for the case study. Data were collected using four different sources and analyzed concurrent to the treatment. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argue that “the timing of analysis and the integration of analysis with other tasks distinguish a qualitative design from traditional, positivistic research. A qualitative design is emergent” (p. 195).

Data generated by a pre-treatment self-assessment administered through a Google Form process were initially analyzed using the embedded analytics of the Google platform. Then, the researcher began the work of coding the data. The analysis was guided by and focused on how the data were related to the dimensions of teacher leadership being addressed by the study: characteristics of teacher leaders, the work they

do in the school, necessary conditions for success, spheres of influence, and experience with shared decision-making. The categorizing of data and the assigning of codes were the result of inferential thinking and comparative analysis of the answers provided by all or some of the participants. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) refer to this as “inductive and comparative” data analysis (p. 201).

Participants created weekly journal responses after reading the chapter and engaging in discussion with the PLC. Analysis of these data was ongoing throughout the treatment with the purpose of identifying emerging themes, topics, and trends across participant responses. The data analysis informed needed additions, deletions, or revisions to subsequent journal prompts. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest that categories must be “responsive, exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitive, and conceptually congruent” (p. 212). This study generated categories that were reflective of the research question as well as the overarching theoretical principles.

The post-treatment self-assessment and structured interview responses were analyzed using the same process but with the purpose of being more reflective of the impact the treatment had on the participants’ awareness of teacher leadership.

At the conclusion of the action research study, the practitioner-researcher met with members of the PLC and shared the data analysis, findings, and recommendations for further action. The group further reflected on the process of the PLC, discussed the data, and suggested additional topics that would be valuable for subsequent groups. Additionally, PLC member participants shared their plans moving forward based on the impact and new learning they acquired about teacher leadership.

Devising an Action Plan

Using a qualitative case study design, this work sought to raise the level of understanding a group of teachers had about the scope and complexities of teacher leadership. The teacher participants took part in a PLC featuring a book study that explored the concept of teacher leadership. Following the PLC and analysis of the data, the practitioner-researcher determined what action plan should be implemented moving forward to the benefit of the ABCES setting.

Ongoing PLC book studies about the scope and complexities of teacher leadership will be offered to certain teacher leaders as part of the annual professional development plan for ABCES. Members of the PLC who completed the initial study, along with other members of the instructional staff, could continue the work in an iterative model, one which examines the dimensions of teacher leadership in a deeper and more thoughtful way and uses different texts to guide the discussion.

In the current year, there was only one leadership opportunity on each grade-level team. Distributed leadership structures will be established for the 2021-2022 school year that share leadership responsibilities across two specific roles: team manager and instructional team leader. Each role will have a specific description in advancing the work of the team. Additionally, two additional roles will be created to support the social-emotional needs of adults and students in the school setting.

Finally, the faculty and staff of ABCES will engage in monthly professional development meetings about creating a culture of contribution and the importance of co-created leadership (Northouse, 2019).

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS FROM THE DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

The teaching staff at ABCES is relatively inexperienced when compared to the national average (NCES, 2019). With 57% of teachers having six or fewer years of experience in the classroom, teachers at this school are called to lead their peers before they have developed a full appreciation for what it means to be a teacher leader. This study examined the impact of a PLC on a group of 10 early career teachers seeking to understand the meaning and practice of teacher leadership in their school setting. The teachers read about and discussed a variety of topics related to leadership over the course of eight weeks with their school principal as the researcher. The problem of practice for this study was the limited understanding teachers at ABCES have about the complexities of teacher leadership and how teacher leaders can influence learning and achievement for all students.

Due to school closures during school year 2020-2021 as a consequence of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the PLC was conducted using a hybrid in-person/synchronous online participation format for the weekly discussion. Pre- and post-book study interview submissions and the weekly journal entries were made using the Google Forms application.

Research Question

What impact will a professional learning community (PLC) have on 10 early career teachers who seek to understand the meaning and practice of teacher leadership?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of a professional learning community (PLC) on 10 early career teachers who seek to understand the meaning and practice of teacher leadership.

As mentioned in Chapter One, for the purpose of this study, a PLC is defined as a group of educators working together to construct new meaning around a topic of study relevant to their work in a specific setting. This study will adhere to the term as described by DuFour et al. (2016), “An ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (p. 10) The main treatment of the study was a PLC that featured weekly discussions based on a variety of professional readings relative to teacher leadership. Moreover, for the purpose of this study, teacher leadership is defined as follows:

Building professional relationships that encourage others to engage deeply with the work of education; leveraging influence formally and informally across the organization to solve problems; utilizing teacher voice to advocate for all students; and participation in shared decision-making processes where the collective goal is the improvement of the school organization as a whole.

Finally, for the purpose of this study, early career teachers are defined as those with one to six years’ experience in the classroom (Buchanan et al., 2013; Ewing &

Manuel, 2005; Mansfield et al., 2013). According to Mansfield et al. (2013), “Teaching is a challenging profession particularly for early career teachers as they meet the demands of the profession and establish themselves in a school community” (p. 547). They go on to suggest that how these teachers navigate the challenges presented in the first years of teaching have long-lasting implications for career development and satisfaction. The aim of this study was to provide a PLC structure whereby early career teachers can develop a better understanding of teacher leadership within their specific school community.

Analysis of the Data

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest that qualitative data analysis “involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said” to answer the research question (p. 202). Moreover, the process requires the use of inductive and deductive reasoning to interpret how the participant responses are relevant to the aim and purpose of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, the analysis of the data informs the implications of the current study for the wider school community context. The following data collection instruments were utilized for this study: pre- and post-Likert scales, pre- and post-structured interviews, weekly reflective journal entries, and observational field notes made by the principal-researcher. The following steps outline the process of data analysis for the current study:

Step 1. Participant responses were printed and organized by week and PLC topic using a note card system (e.g., Week 6: Professional Trust). Initially, the four datasets were analyzed separately.

Step 2. The responses of each dataset were annotated and assigned a code to identify “meaningful segments of data” of each individual response that were

related to the research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 203). Examples of codes include sharing, resources, culture, teaching practices, respect, growth, hurt feelings, cooperation, support, and trust.

Step 3. The coded segments within each dataset were grouped using analytical coding or axial coding, which “comes from interpretation and reflection on meaning” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 206). Examples of analytical codes include collaboration, community, relationships, connecting, support, collective responsibility, and professional trust.

Step 4. Each dataset was analyzed to identify emerging thematic categories. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommend a recursive process where the researcher continually compares the smaller segments of data to the broader thematic categories to ensure an aligned and comprehensive procedure. Themes that emerged from this stage were how the teachers communicate with each other, issues surrounding professional trust, and the importance of supporting the leader in the work of leading through participating.

Step 5. Responses from all four data sources were aggregated. As a result of this process, three major themes related to teacher leadership emerged: communication, trust, and a culture that encourages contribution to the process (Figure 4.1).

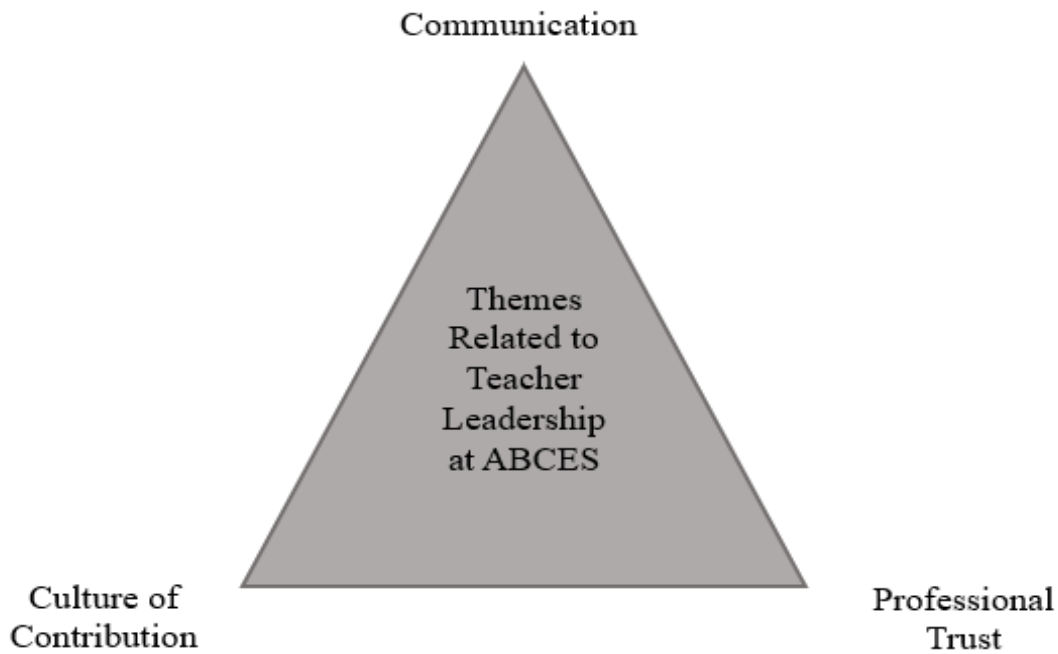


Figure 4.1 *Themes Related to Teacher Leadership at ABCES*

The following sections will detail how the participants expressed their thoughts, feelings, and understandings of these three themes in relation to the practice of teacher leadership.

Theme One: Communication

Communication emerged as a major theme from the aggregate data analysis because of the persistent presence of issues related to communication within each of the four data sets. No matter the topic of discussion, each participant referenced the critical importance of communication to the resolution of impediments to moving forward in relationships and removing roadblocks to team process. When reviewing the anecdotes shared during the discussion sessions, through reflective journal entries, and interview

responses, I found that each participant commented in some way on how communication exchange was central to their problem or resolution. The voices highlighted in this section are representative of the idea that communication is foundational to the practice of teacher leadership and illustrate the types of difficulties reported by the participants. Effective communication at ABCES requires the willingness of everyone in the organization to accomplish the goals of the school. Moreover, the participants emphasized that communication requires a two-way exchange: listening to and sharing ideas and information. However, the PLC book study discovered that this simple truth is complicated by relational issues present in team environments and that teacher leaders must navigate carefully to keep collaborative processes on track.

When the topic of communication was first broached, the participants shared, in rapid-fire succession, the challenges related to the volume of information that needs to be shared, the best method for staying in constant contact, and who needs to be included. During the initial discussion about communication loops, the participants focused on the tools for communication and said that most teacher leaders at ABCES use email, texting, Google collaboration tools, and regular meetings to keep the teams connected. It was Stephanie who first described how quickly the climate of a team can turn negative when someone on the team is left out of the loop. She shared that, in her case, “It made me feel really bad, I mean *really* hurt and angry, and frustrated that they [colleagues] left our team meeting and then as a small group – in the parking lot – just decided what we should do.” Her comments unleashed a flurry of similar examples from others about when they had either participated in or been excluded from a “side-bar” conversation. As the principal of the school and researcher in this study, I was aware of this phenomenon

and had witnessed the havoc it had wrought on some of the teams at ABCES in terms of team dynamics, hurt feelings, and disruption to the work of the team. I was disappointed that these early career teachers were already aware of the damage this behavior has on the culture of the team.

The participants in the PLC book study were keenly aware that these side-bar conversations are due, in part, to the different perceptions and interpretations of events and information of people on their team. Perspective is shaped by values, beliefs, and experiences, and teachers are not immune to these influences when working in a team environment. During the week 2 discussion, Jordan talked about a struggle that had occurred during a recent planning period: “Two members of my team wanted to take a very different approach to the learning activities. The team leader did not intervene or help break the impasse. After some tense and uncomfortable moments where they just repeated their positions, the team members started to clarify their position.” Jordan concluded, “It took both teachers explaining their reasoning to come to a compromise that included elements of both approaches. I think we could have gotten there faster if someone had stepped in to help sort it out.”

I was not surprised that Jordan was an active part of this particular discussion topic. I know from my work with her as the school principal that she has experienced many issues of conflict on her team during her short career at ABCES. Jordan admitted, “I usually disagree [with my team] about the plan, but we have the same end goal – all I want is for the students to learn – that’s where we start.” The PLC group concluded that having a shared vision and common goals can provide the touchstone for teams that see things differently.

Threaded throughout the data was the belief that teacher leaders and team members must be willing to engage in difficult conversations to find common ground and that effective communication comes from the desire to understand one another. Megan felt that it was not enough to find common ground, but that it was also important to explore the source of differing opinions as a team, “Transparency about disagreements is important. What is it we disagree about? Philosophy, style, methods?” She went on to say that working through those disagreements, or differences in perspective, “in the moment” would set teaching teams up to be more successful in the future. Anita admitted, “It can be hard to seek first to understand. Hard to put them ahead of myself. But, as long as both parties are trying to understand each other you can meet in the middle. We have to try if we want to succeed as a team.”

Before engaging in the PLC book study, participants recognized the construct of *communication* as important to efficient team processes. Responses to interview questions asked prior to the study included statements like leaders need to be a “good listener” and have “strong communication skills.” A few participants were more specific in describing the purpose of communication. Candace wrote that leaders, “facilitate communication within their grade level,” while Gina noted that leaders need to “communicate information from administrators and coaches.” However, the baseline data showed that most participants lacked a nuanced understanding of the communication skills needed to lead a teaching team through a sustained collaborative process.

After participating in the PLC book study, participants described teacher leadership as the facilitation of communication for a group of adults, and effective communication was identified as central to the work of teacher leaders. Interview

responses indicated that participants grew in their understanding that interpersonal communication is essential to effective team collaboration. Megan was passionate in her stance about professional discourse as the pathway to developing effective relationships. She described skilled teacher leaders as those who are “able to listen and hear all sides. To take in information and consider varying opinions. And then to help other people see and accept consensus.” Candance elaborated on the importance of remaining neutral while listening, commenting that “communication is listening. Not taking sides. Making decisions after weighing all the input from the team. Summarizing the big picture.” Anita commented that teacher leaders are responsible for keeping the members of a team talking: “they facilitate open communication, with a willingness to listen, understand, and problem solve.”

The data indicated an increase in awareness in the participants of *specific* communication skills employed by effective teacher leaders, including active listening, summarizing, restating the problem, and facilitating group consensus. Amie, a 4th grade teacher, reflected that after a few weeks of working with PLC as part of the study:

I became more observant of the leadership moves made by my colleagues.

Noticed more. My team leader would ask for input from everyone, make sure all of us have a voice at the table – during planning or decision-making – especially when we don’t agree or someone is really pushing her point-of-view. Our team lead is great at facilitation. I am more aware of things like that.

Similarly, Dawn noted how leaders need to use non-verbal communication and observation to stay in-tune with the rest of the team, “Teacher leaders need to be listening

with all of their senses to the subtext and underlying messages that are being said by the team. Not just what they say but what they mean.”

The participants indicated that teacher leaders should embrace diversity of thought and experience to create consensus for all members of the team. During week 6 of the PLC, Dawn stated the importance of understanding how other people function in the work place, “Negative feelings come from a lack of communication or understanding because we don’t take the time to learn how everyone *works*.” When relating the story about two members of her team, Jordan recalled, “It was hard for them to understand each other’s points of view until a conversation was had that outlined their different personality traits and the challenges that they would have to overcome to work together. Having the conversation about what one needs from the other (and vice versa) was helpful in providing perspective in terms of their opposing viewpoints.” Teacher leaders face the challenge of working with and managing personalities; Reese suggested that using a protocol with the team (e.g., Compass Points) would provide an opportunity to create a neutral, non-judgmental space to discuss different work habits and styles.

Theme Two: Trust

Unlike the emerging theme one, where the participant responses were consistent across the board in identifying communication as necessary to advancing team process, theme two emerged as a nexus of different considerations and concerns expressed by the participants. Bethany and Stephanie focused on managing relationships and building professional spaces where people can feel emotionally safe and share vulnerabilities. Candance, Dawn, and Jordan were concerned about including more voices in decision-making and the need to be intentional about transparency. Gina was a very strong

contributor to the conversation around respect. Her experiences with dishonesty on her team left her wary of engaging in leadership activities that are not visibly supported by the administration. And lastly, all participants had some experience with the damage exclusive, side-bar conversations have in creating factions within grade-level teams. Together, these stories and concerns related to the work of teacher leadership were synthesized under the concept of trust.

Bethany noted that teacher leaders create a “safe space for all people – even when or maybe especially when – they don’t get along.” As they made their way through eight weeks of discussion, the participants revisited the idea of professional trust as key to creating open lines of communication and creating a space where adult relationships could be managed in order to meet the needs of the school. Some of the challenges to developing trust include anxiety and feelings of vulnerability among team members. Stephanie confessed that she often stops sharing her opinions during team meetings:

I don’t know how they feel? Are they walking away and talking about me? You know, I want them to treat me with integrity; taking it [her opinion] in the way I meant it. Interpret my intent correctly. But they don’t engage with me so I don’t know how they feel.

Professional trust at all levels of the organization is key to open communication, growth-producing conversations, and building consensus for decision-making. Participants reported that teacher leaders must be trusted by administrators to implement programming and follow established rules and policies. Gina believed teacher leaders must be trusted by their colleagues to be “the final arbiter” when discussions are over and

decisions need to be made, and she strongly advocated for the school principal to lay the ground rules for the team process. She said:

If all teachers on the staff were told by the principal what the teacher leaders were expected to accomplish and how the other team members were expected to support, then it would be easier for team members to trust that the leader wasn't *going rogue* and just doing what they want.

Professional conversations must remain transparent and available for all members to access and contribute. During the discussion of trust, the issue of "side-bar conversations" was raised as an example of behavior that can erode trust on a team. Reese said, "If a person doesn't speak up in the team meeting and then goes out in the parking lot to complain – that doesn't help anyone. We can't change or address what we don't know about." It is difficult for a team to resolve issues when team members withhold their true feelings or opinions from the whole group then share their frustrations after-the-fact with a select few.

In the reflective journal responses from week 4, the thoughts of all participants concluded that teaching teams must have strong foundations of professional trust for members to freely discuss student performance data from their classrooms. Bethany admitted, "Data discussions are awkward as a teacher. When you mention the word *data* you can sense a thickness in the air. Data is a deep feeling word for many teachers." According to 60% of the teachers in the study, analyzing and discussing student performance data creates feelings of stress, embarrassment, vulnerability, and guilt. Participants reported that teacher leaders could mitigate those feelings by creating a safe space to share and problem-solve by modeling vulnerability and how to talk about

weaknesses in the data in the group setting. As Stephanie suggested, “The team leader could share some of their personal data and ask the team for help...maybe an area that they feel weak in.” Teacher leaders are in the position to set the purpose and tone of data meetings so that all teachers feel able to seek help in improving practices that would result in improved student learning outcomes.

The successful resolution of conflict is the result of effective communication channels that are established with the express purpose of allowing all team members a voice in the process. Important points were raised about the role of the teacher leader in advocating for less-assertive members of the team to have a way to contribute their thoughts to the collective decision-making process. Candance could see how the breakdown impacted the team and instructional planning, “We can’t support each other when we don’t know how everyone is feeling... communicating with more people also helps us get a wider range of feedback and ideas.” Additionally, Candance suggested that once consensus is established with all voices counted, a teacher leader can move forward without changing or altering the parameters of that decision to reflect her own opinion. She believed that transparency and respecting the democratic space were critical steps in establishing trust.

Ad hoc discussions were identified by the group as a seemingly small but significant barrier to building trust. When small groups from a team have impromptu meetings in the hall, on Zoom, or at lunch, they deny other members of the team access to that information. Repeated exclusion from small group gatherings builds resentment among those left out and quickly erodes trust. Dawn remarked that 100% distance learning due to COVID-19 had exacerbated this phenomenon because half of her team

was teaching from the school and the other half of the team was teaching from home. The proximity to each other meant they could touch base between lessons, eat lunch together, and enjoy the feeling of collaborating in person. Dawn reflected, “You have to be intentional about noticing who is or isn’t there. Who do we need to let know? And then reach out to let them know what we talked about. Make sure they are okay.”

In Chapter Five of *Leading in Sync: Teacher Leaders and Principals Working Together for Student Learning*, Harrison Berg (2018) presents four dimensions of professional trust: respect, personal regard, competence, and integrity. The following sections reflect data analysis related to those specific dimensions.

Respect. Participants reported strong feelings and experiences in relation to feeling heard, valued, and respected in the workplace. They reported this as a constant struggle in most team environments, especially the relentless challenge of gossip and betrayals of confidence. Gina confided, “Regaining trust is hard. Recently, lies were told. To me. By people on my team. I need to trust you to do your job but if you lie I can’t. And it’s frustrating when there is no ownership. It is HARD to rebuild. I have a hard time trusting again.” The dimension of trust moderated by *respect* can also be lost when a person musters the courage to suggest an idea to the team and their vulnerability is met with derision or casual dismissal. And once lost, respect is the hardest dimension of trust to rebuild.

Personal Regard. Harrison Berg (2018) describes the dimension of personal regard as “trusting that you will take actions that have my best interests at heart” (p. 100). When writing about personal regard, the participants noted how complicated this dimension of trust can be. Amie confessed that it is hard to set boundaries when trying to

demonstrate personal regard for everyone. She admitted to answering emails and texts at all hours of the night and on weekends because she felt pressure to demonstrate caring. Dawn recalled an incident where her team members went to administration about an issue rather than coming to her to directly address their concern. She felt betrayed by their maneuvering and efforts to avoid conflict, and it has prevented her from embracing her place on the team. Megan suggested that personal regard is the one type of trust that is needed for all the others to occur.

Integrity. The dimension of trust centered on integrity assumes that one will do what one say and is expected to do. The teaching teams at ABCES are fiercely collaborative, as that is the culture and expectation of the school community. All participants expressed challenges with integrity around the issue of lesson planning and feedback; each team has a process for the distribution of planning responsibilities and communication loops for feedback. A rigorous pacing guide means that these tasks must be completed at the specific cadence for each lesson to be completed on time. The issues of trust and integrity surface when there are different understandings about deadlines, due dates, and work habits of each team member. Bethany admitted this to be an issue for her:

I can be a procrastinator, but I will always have my work done by the deadline. I think this area of trust comes when you understand how the others on your team work. Does she work ahead? Do they expect you/me to? Do they get upset when you meet the set deadline but not their “deadline”? Those are the questions and conversations that must be had at the core of any team.

Without meaningful communication about when and how each member will meet the planning and feedback expectations, trust centered on integrity will remain tenuous.

Competence. The dimension of trust based on competence is straightforward and develops when a person believes that the other has the knowledge and skills needed to complete the assigned job or task. Study participants reported feeling high levels of trust for their colleagues and believed them to be capable of performing any and all tasks related to their collaborative teaming. Jordan said that her team “proves time and again how competent they are by the plans they make and the things they share about their classroom practices.” However, Stephanie and Amie both confided that they wondered if *they* were worthy of this type of trust from their teammates and if they personally possessed the skills needed to fully support the efforts of their team. The discussion group wondered how they, Stephanie and Amie, might communicate or broadcast their low self-efficacy to their team and if it could be related to how people perceive their ability to complete a task.

Theme Three: Creating a Culture of Contribution

Through every discussion, reflection post, and even in the passing comments between sessions, the members of the PLC considered the role all teachers play in the process of leadership. They talked about the behaviors of the leader and the behaviors of the team as two sides of the same coin: a symbiotic relationship in which each was dependent on the other for survival. There was some debate about what it means to support the leader; Gina suggested that recognizing the leader as the “final arbiter” related to team decision making was important while Jordan and Anita insisted that teachers have a responsibility to share professional knowledge with their teams. Reese confessed trying to make others adhere to timelines and agendas was exhausting, thankless work. The commonality illuminated through the data analysis process was the

need for others – the team members – to contribute to the process. Moreover, as a condition to support teacher leadership, the school should create a culture that encourages all members of the organization to do their part in building and sustaining healthy team environments.

In the early days of our PLC, Reese shared her favorite proverb, “If you are leading and no one is following – then you are simply taking a walk.” The phrase evolved into a kind of shorthand or code phrase for the critical importance of contributions to group process and was frequently referenced by other members of the cohort during subsequent discussions. Indeed, the PLC group found that a participatory climate is essential for effective collaboration and group process.

Whether the topic was communication, working with different personality types, or having data conversations, issues of participation and making contributions to the process were present in the conversation. Contribution was broadly defined and ranged from creature comforts that supported morale (e.g., snacks) to tangible products like a lesson plan or activity (e.g., Nearpod module). In the context of SY2020, technology-based instruction was an immediate need and a huge challenge for teams to produce quickly and with quality.

Anita shared, “One of my coworkers learned how to create Bitmoji classroom activities for students and took the lead in teaching the rest of the team and sharing the things she already created. They were super engaging and we really needed to have activities like this for the kids to do online.” The PLC participants agreed that this type of contribution was necessary and greatly appreciated, but low-stakes in terms of professional trust and vulnerability.

Conversely, the team explored areas where the act of contribution was less tangible but nonetheless played a significant role in the team process. These are areas where contribution intersects with the need for effective communication and professional trust: providing and accepting feedback, suggestions for edits, and challenging the status quo. Stephanie shared her observations and difficulties in this area with her colleague, named Sue:

Sue is sometimes reluctant to join in change efforts...She doesn't always want to explore new strategies, or talk about her own insecurities and struggles with her teaching practice. She sometimes acts like she knows it all, and ideas from her mentor and others are just disregarded...Sue sees herself as a multitasker and is often juggling multiple balls, but they're dropping around her if you're looking in from outside.

Stephanie went on to say that a teacher leader would need to be very skilled to facilitate a team environment in which Sue was able ask for, receive, and accept help from the team.

As was mentioned in the section addressing Theme 1: Communication, Gina was adamant that the school principal is responsible for setting the expectations for the team leader–team member relationship as a condition necessary for success. She commented, “Admin needs to paint a clear picture of how the teams should work. What is the vision? All teachers need to hear it – So others don't assume the teacher leaders are just doing their own thing.” The line between following blindly without question and contributing to the work of the team was hotly debated between Gina, Amie, and other members of the

team. While Gina saw it as a simple matter of recognizing authority, Amie suggested that it was a matter of how a teacher sees her relationship to the school:

Am I a single classroom teacher who is responsible for the learning that, sink or swim, happens behind my door, or am I a part of something bigger – a place where I take care of our community and each other – and am I committed to the idea that working together is better for kids than working alone?

Stephanie emphasized the importance of understanding how the work of the team serves the “bigger picture” as outlined in the school’s strategic plan:

We really need to talk about the *why*? We need to know the purpose behind the change. We understand the why (for instance, virtual learning – the *why* is to keep us all safe and healthy). But with IMSE [multi-sensory educational strategies] – I was worried. But then I was given the research behind it and how it helps the kids beyond first grade – the big picture really helped me get on board.

In the end, active contribution to efforts of team process (e.g., planning, sharing resources, listening to ideas, and coming to consensus) was determined by the participants to be an act of citizenship. Teacher leaders have either volunteered or been tasked by admin to facilitate the process of working together in a team to meet the needs of students. However, the members of the PLC were in vocal agreement that it is not the role of the teacher leader to convince or persuade their colleagues to perform their duties as outlined by the principal. All teachers on the team are responsible for supporting the work of the leader and contributing to the group process so that we can provide the best educational experience possible for all students.

Interpretation of the Results

Over the eight-week PLC, the participants in the study came to understand the complexities of communication and the myriad of situations, large and small, where a teacher leader must carefully share ideas and information to advance the work of the team. Importantly, these exchanges can make members of the team feel included and empowered by the process or can leave them feeling excluded, vulnerable, and marginalized. Communication is the responsibility of everyone on the team, but teacher leaders are positioned to create processes for how and when people will share information, thus keeping the channels open. However, the harder work for the leader is to support a team culture where all members are committed to using such communication channels so that the work of the team will be highly effective (Berg, 2018).

During the study, all participants referenced the significance of positive, professional relationships to effective communication in the school setting. In a practical sense, teacher leaders must learn how their colleagues prefer to communicate and then use those channels to transparently provide and solicit information. Understanding how others need to receive information and provide feedback was deemed, by the group, to be critical to developing positive communication habits on a team. However, communication barriers created by philosophical and values-based conflicts are harder to resolve. Teacher leaders must use interpersonal communication skills, like responding to non-verbal signals, to help their colleagues find common ground and develop the professional respect to work together despite their differences.

Collaborative teams cannot be highly effective if professional relationships are not strengthened by trust. Further, professional relationships that are moderated by

suspicion and weakened by gossip will erode the culture of the school. Participants in this study came to understand the different ways in which people trust each other in a professional setting. Participants who had previously experienced broken trust through a negative exchange in the workplace did not believe it could, or should, be regained quickly. The study group concluded that trust is fragile and must be carefully and thoughtfully developed and maintained. The implications of broken trust are ineffective teams and a damaged, negative school culture (Berg, 2018).

Effective communication must be a two-way exchange. Information is passed and relationships are built with the exchange of ideas and feelings. Teacher leaders can provide communication channels, ask questions, and request feedback, but without the participation of all team members, or followers, the communication will be extinguished. Participants in the study acknowledged that effective communication is specific, timely, and shared in a space in which all team members have access. Developing consensus requires understanding, if not agreement, on all sides and from all parties. And it is critical that challenges, disagreements, and professional discourse stay in the shared space. Collaborative teaching teams cannot survive toxic communication loops that develop when professional dissatisfaction is explored in side-bar conversations.

One member of the group, Gina, remained firm in her stance that establishing shared goals and eliciting the willing participation in the process by all members could only be achieved with the direct intervention and authority of the principal. Time and again during the PLC, she stated that teacher leaders are not equipped to handle resistance, subversive behaviors (e.g., side-bar conversations), or outright refusals to communicate within the structures of their teams. Gina insisted that the principal must

communicate the expectations for participation to the whole faculty and establish the norms for the organization, rather than leaving that work to the teacher leaders. In the end, it seemed like Gina needed a mandate, or at least a public declaration of her authorization, to act as a proxy of the principal.

Trust requires a commitment from all members to act in the best interest of the organization and, by extension, its people. A teacher leader must be transparent and act with honesty and integrity in service of the students, the team, and the community. However, other teachers on the team must return that honesty to preserve the relationships that create the foundation of the group. Effective teams do not lie to each other or withhold the truth or feelings. The participants of this study revealed how broken trust and bruised feelings can disrupt the performance of a team. Teacher leaders need to believe that their team is in support of their leadership. If this area of trust is not in place, then the teacher leader is not likely to make any real progress with the group toward actualizing the larger goals of the organization.

Looking ahead to SY2021-2022, seven of the 10 participants in this study will be serving in formal leadership roles for ABCES. Their involvement in the PLC book study increased their understanding of the nature and practice of leadership at ABCES. Moreover, they are positioned to recognize areas where they might experience resistance and need to apply empathy, active listening, and other communication skills to help facilitate the work of their teams. An important result of participation in the study for these participants were the relationships they developed within the PLC itself; moving forward, they can turn to each other for support, resources, encouragement, and advice related to the challenges of teacher leadership.

Conclusion

Professional trust is foundational to a school where teacher leadership can thrive. Teacher leaders need the trust and support of others within the organization to be successful. School administrators must clearly communicate the expectations for the teacher leaders to the school community and then trust the teacher leaders to do the work. Shared vision and collective commitment to the goals of the school will foster an environment where teacher leaders can be successful.

However, the colleagues and teammates of the teacher leaders must engage in active participation by contributing to the processes the teacher leaders are charged with facilitating. Teacher leaders cannot do this work alone; participants in this study emphasized that the organization as a whole must actively support the actions, tasks, and development of team systems. As York-Barr and Duke (2004) conclude, “The likelihood of being successful as a teacher leader is increased if roles and expectations are mutually shaped and negotiated by teacher leaders, their colleagues, and principals on the basis of context specific (and changing) instructional and improvement needs (p. 288). Leadership is a group activity, and the participation of every member of the organization is necessary to meet its goals.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

Teacher leadership is a broad term used across the field of education to indicate those professionals who work outside their classrooms to maintain the momentum of teaching and learning within a local school context. Job descriptions for teacher leaders typically describe task and management duties, like reporting and compliance activities, that are necessary to meet the demands of high-accountability systems (Fiarman, 2017). However, teacher leadership as a construct includes the facilitation of collaborative processes that improve instructional planning, standards alignment, differentiation, and data-driven decision-making (Allen & Blythe, 2018; DuFour et al., 2016; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Moreover, the literature suggests that teacher leader development will improve all facets of the local school context, including school culture, teacher retention, and student learning (Carver, 2016; Ingersoll & Dougherty, 2018; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Wenner & Campbell, 2017).

Teachers leave schools that serve students from high-poverty communities, like ABCES, at a higher rate than their economically advantaged counterparts (Goldring et al., 2014). Elevated teacher attrition rates mean that high-poverty schools are entry points for early career teachers (Parrett & Budge, 2012). This reality results in teachers being asked to serve as leaders early in their career (Ado, 2016). The aim of this study was to

engage in discussions about topics relevant to the work of teacher leaders with early career teachers to help expand their awareness and understanding of how teacher leaders can impact the local school setting.

Research Question

What impact will a professional learning community (PLC) have on 10 early career teachers who seek to understand the meaning and practice of teacher leadership?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of a professional learning community (PLC) on 10 early career teachers who seek to understand the meaning and practice of teacher leadership.

Summary of the Study

The PLC for 10 early career teachers met for eight weeks in the fall of 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic mitigation efforts, the group met in a hybrid environment, with some members using the Zoom video-conferencing platform to participate, while others attended in person. Guided by selected readings, the group discussed and reflected on issues relevant to teacher leadership in the local school setting, including working effectively with adults, leading and participating in data-driven conversations, creating a shared vision, and the four domains of professional trust (Berg, 2018; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Mieliwocki & Fatheree, 2019).

Participants completed a pre-study assessment that included self-rated Likert scales and structured interview questions. These instruments provided baseline data related to understanding, awareness, and beliefs held by the participants related to teacher leadership. Following each of the weekly discussion sessions, participants completed a

journal response reflecting on a specific prompt related to the reading. The principal-researcher recorded field notes during the discussion sessions to capture the thoughts and feelings expressed during the discussion. Finally, a post-study assessment included self-rated Likert scales and structured interview questions to provide a comparison point to the data collected prior to the study. Using a qualitative data analysis process, three major themes, or understandings related to the practice of teacher leadership at ABCES, emerged from the data produced by the participants:

1. Communication is essential to the team process
2. Trust is the foundation of effective teams
3. Contributions by all members of the team are essential to the process of leadership

Implications of the Findings

Three themes related to teacher leadership emerged from the analysis of the data: the critical importance of communication, the solid foundation provided by professional trust, and the necessity for participation and contribution by all members of a team. These three themes could be examined in isolation as independent variables; however, the data analysis revealed the importance of how these themes intersect to establish conditions that support effective teacher leadership at ABCES. Figure 5.1 illustrates how each theme is supported and strengthened by the others.



Figure 5.1 *Conditions for Effective Teacher Leadership*

Advocates for Change. It is important to note that after participating in the research study, the members of the PLC book discussion group seemed empowered to speak up, to use their new understanding of leadership to advocate for changes to existing leadership structures. Moreover, they asked the principal to create leadership opportunities for those who wanted to lead in areas related to culture. Overall, the participants were anxious to experience changes to the current systems at ABCES.

Most of the changes and action items planned in response to the research study will be implemented during SY2021-2022, and all but three of the study participants will take on leadership roles under the newly established structures. Immediately following the start of the book study, many of the participants were observed making changes to their own level of contributions to their teams. Amie, who was typically unwilling or

cautious about sharing instructional ideas, started to suggest strategies, activities, and resources related to planning with her team. One afternoon, Candace stopped the principal in the hall to express her frustration about the way an issue was handled on her team. However, instead of just sharing a grievance, she suggested a way that the leader might have handled the situation differently and how she was going to speak up and challenge the outcome.

Significantly, three participants participated in district-level sponsored professional development and planning to prepare for the implementation of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and restructuring on how we provide instructional and social-emotional support for students. Following their training, these participants met with the principal and assistant principal to plan for how grade-level and vertical teams will address equity with intention through the team process.

A Matter of Equity. ABCES is a Title 1 school that serves a diverse community where 82% of the students are people of color (Virginia Department of Education, 2020). As was discussed in Chapter Two, teachers leave high-poverty schools at higher rates and earlier in their careers than teachers at their neighboring suburban schools (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Parrett & Budge, 2012). Teachers report leaving these schools because of lack of support from their colleagues, a lack of organizational focus on student learning, and not being included in decision-making that drives the priorities of the school (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Holmes et al., 2019; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Developing teacher leadership skills and providing increased opportunities can address these organizational deficits; creating conditions in which teachers can engage in

effective collaboration focused on student learning is the key to teacher retention in high-poverty schools like ABCES (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Simon & Johnson, 2015).

The establishment of effective PLCs can dramatically impact student achievement and are directly linked with long-term increases in student learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; DuFour et al., 2016; Hunzicker, 2012). Teacher leaders at ABCES must create democratic spaces using effective communication that are strengthened by professional trust and supported by a culture of contribution. This will require a discourse that challenges the status quo and urges all teachers to provide instruction that is responsive to culture and inclusive of all abilities. Teacher leaders at ABCES will be positioned to facilitate team processes that result in high-quality educational experiences for all students.

The Role of the School Principal. The school leader, or in this case the principal-researcher, is uniquely positioned to influence the development of teacher leaders in a way that encourages democratic spaces and shared decision-making (Berg, 2018; Danielson, 2016). As Danielson (2016) emphasizes, “The principal’s most important role is to establish and sustain a school wide community of professional inquiry – a community in which educators learn from one another and draw on their colleagues’ knowledge and insights to enhance their own teaching” (p. 22). This can be accomplished by creating a culture that is safe for risk-taking, embraces continuous improvement, and in which all teachers are seen as sources for professional learning (Berg, 2018; Danielson, 2016; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). York-Barr and Duke (2004) suggest that school leaders focus on three areas for development efforts: the individual teacher, the collaborative team, and the organizational structures.

Action Steps

In response to the three themes, or essential understandings, about teacher leadership revealed by the data collection and analysis of this qualitative study, the principal-researcher developed short and mid-range action items for the local school context. These action steps address each of the three focus areas suggested by York-Barr and Duke (2004) and include adjustments to grade-level teaming practices, the addition of leadership positions to foster distributed and shared decision-making, and ongoing embedded professional development about the critical practice of contribution by all members of the organization. The action steps will require technical and adaptive changes to the processes at ABCES and must be nested to scaffold for necessary changes in behaviors, capacities, and values (Powell & Kusuma-Powell, 2015).

Individual Development. Prior to the current study, each grade level at ABCES had one grade-level leader who was responsible for organizing the team on a task management level and for facilitating the team process related to instructional activities and collaboration (see Figure 1.1). In response to the data analysis and findings, the principal-researcher restructured the team roles for SY2021-2022 to increase opportunities for leadership and to foster distributed and shared decision-making (see Figure 5.2).

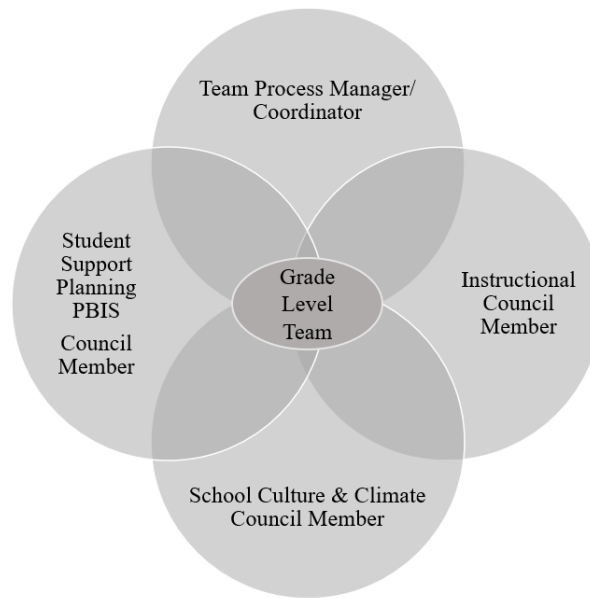


Figure 5.2 *Distribution of Leadership Roles Across a Grade-Level Team*

The updated structures were introduced to the staff of ABCES in a faculty meeting (Appendix E) in which members of the ABCES were encouraged to apply for these positions to self-identify an interest in leading. The new structures include the following opportunities for each grade-level team, Kindergarten through 4th grade and Special Education and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) team members:

- Grade-Level/Team Coordinator – Management Council
 - Will work to manage a team related to scheduling, tasks, due dates, communication loops, and methods
- Grade-Level/Team Instructional Leadership Council

- Will work to facilitate a team process related to the implementation of instructional programming related to district- and school-level priorities
- Grade-Level/Team School Culture Council (Sunshine +, events, recognitions)
 - Will work to strengthen our school culture by supporting the social-emotional needs of the staff
- Grade-Level/Team PBIS Student Support Planning
 - Will work to strengthen our school culture by supporting the social-emotional needs of the students

Grade-level coordinators. Grade-level coordinators will attend monthly professional development meetings that will follow the PLC book study structure implemented as part of the action research study. The PLC (i.e., the Management Council) will have seven members who will communicate with each other about the calendar, tasks, and upcoming events for the school as well as read and discuss topics relevant to effective team processes (e.g., professional trust, communication, and working with diverse personalities). Additionally, they will coordinate with their counterparts on other teams and with school administrators to ensure transparency and open lines of communication related to team processes.

Grade-level instructional leaders. Grade-level instructional leaders will attend monthly professional development meetings led at the district level by the Director of Instruction using a book study model of *Learning By Doing* (DuFour et al., 2016). The purpose of the year-long cohort model is to align the instructional practices at ABCES

with those at other elementary schools in the district as well as to develop the instructional leadership skills and capacities of the members. Seven teachers from ABCES will join this PLC, which will be focused on improving instructional practices and implementing professional communities at the school level.

School culture council. Team members appointed to the school culture council will plan activities as part of a school-wide effort to support the emotional needs of the teachers as the building engages in adaptive and systems changes. This role will require the leaders to listen, observe, support, and respond to their colleagues who are experiencing discomfort or stress as part of the process. This leader may need to alert administration to any unmet needs.

Creating the culture of contribution. Beginning with the return of staff to the building in August of 2021 and continuing with monthly staff meetings thereafter, the faculty and staff of ABCES will engage in professional learning about the importance of contributing to the goals of the organization. Northouse (2019) relates a theoretical model where members of a team environment “co-create a process” for decision-making that features a fluid distribution of authority that is not hierarchically based (p. 305). The Northouse model will serve as the foundation for discussions about contribution and sharing leadership. The ABCES faculty and staff will unpack the definition of and misconceptions about leadership, and will share examples to bolster support for developing leaders at all levels. Additionally, the staff will create contribution norms and essential agreements.

Collaborative Teams

As Danielson (2016) suggests, “Principals are ideally situated to establish the school wide structures that enable teachers to learn from one another and to develop their collective wisdom” (p. 23). To that end, the principal-researcher has established three days a week where grade-level teams will meet with instructional coaches and administration. The purpose of these structures is to set expectations for systematic discussions about teaching and learning following the DuFour (2016) model for PLCs and to provide support for developing leaders as they practice implementing communication protocols and norms for participation. Additionally, it is important for the principal to engage with the instructional teams as a co-learner in the process (Danielson, 2016). The team meeting schedule for SY2021-2022 will be established as follows:

- Monday – Alternating Math and Language Arts content planning and discussion with content area coaches.
- Tuesday – Alternating Science and Social Studies content planning and discussion with content area coaches.
- Wednesday – Looking ahead and orientation to pacing. Each team will meet with the principal and answer the four questions posed by DuFour et al. (2016) in relation to the upcoming week or unit of study. Additionally, or alternatively, the four questions will be posed about the previous unit of study, assessment results, and plans for reteaching content if necessary.

Organizational Structures

Nested within the above-noted changes to leadership responsibilities and efforts to develop team processes are the necessary changes in organizational structures needed

to support the work. Leadership structures have been adjusted to move away from the previous hierarchical chain-of-command to a more diversified group of educators participating in decision-making (Northouse, 2016). The increases in leadership roles will support the creation of a culture of contribution where all members are invested in the effective functioning of the team. Figure 5.3 illustrates how these structures collapse the hierarchy within each team, and Figure 5.4 shows how vertical council structures increase access to decision-making for all members of the team.

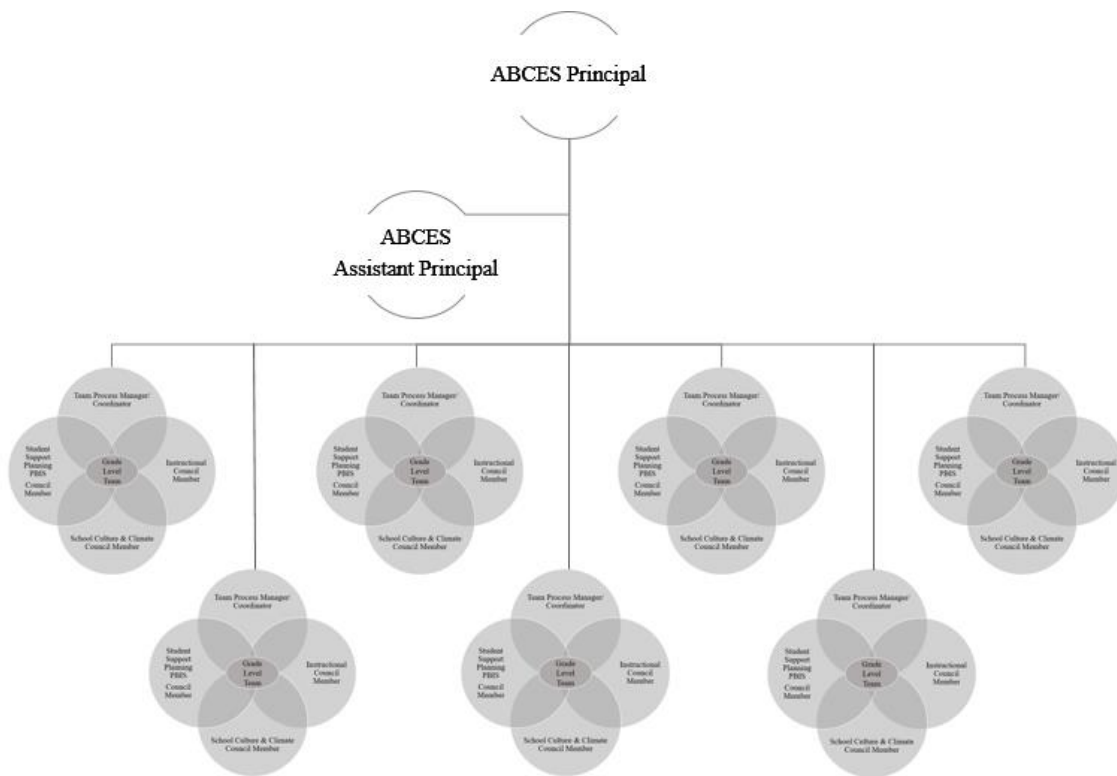


Figure 5.3 ABCES Grade-Level Team Structure for SY2021-2022

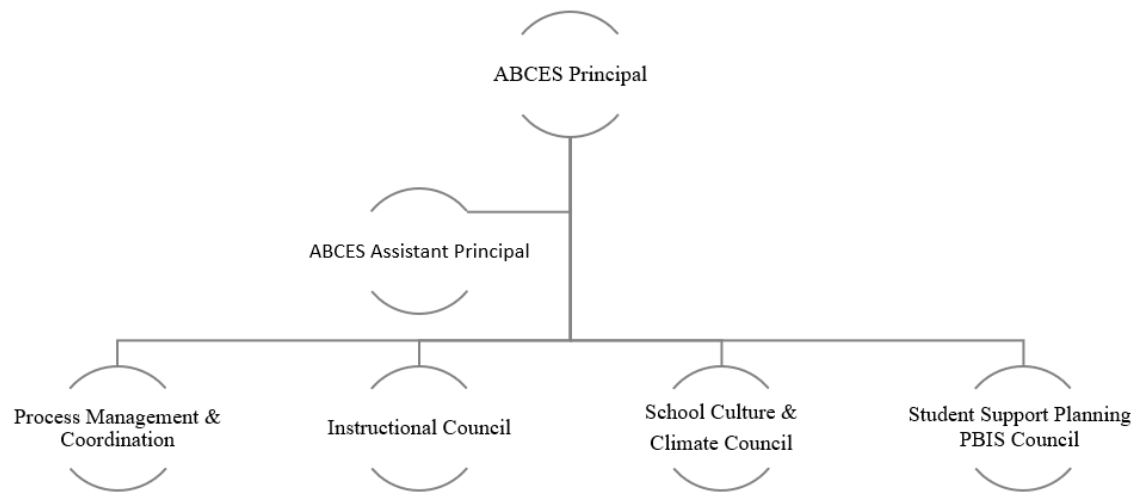


Figure 5.4 *ABCES Vertical Council Groups for SY2021-2022*

Professional development devoted to the leadership will be scheduled monthly at the school and district levels. Team meetings (PLCs) will happen at regular intervals with established agenda items, attendance, and procedural support. Professional development will be embedded into monthly staff meetings so that all staff, not just those in grade-level team meetings, will be part of the collective conversations about participation and contribution.

The addition of a council group dedicated solely to the social-emotional support of staff is an effort to acknowledge and sustain the teachers and support staff in the building while they are experiencing organizational change. The participants in the study consistently referred to the emotional toll of working with adults to serve students in a high-poverty community can take on a teacher. Combined with the additional stress of adaptive challenges present in systems change, this emotional toll could lead to teacher

burnout if not directly and carefully addressed (Evans, 1996; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009).

Recommendations for Future Research

Further research into the development of leadership skills as part of new teacher induction could be beneficial to those schools and systems with higher rates of teacher turnover. Additionally, research into raising the awareness of pre-service and early career teachers about the complexities of teacher leadership could help dispel the belief that some inexperienced teachers hold that teacher leadership is, primarily, a managerial role. Importantly, the exploration of participation and active contribution by all team members specifically within an educational context would be valuable for those establishing teaming norms and agreements.

Summary

Teacher leadership development can help stem the flow of teacher attrition in high-poverty schools, like ABCES, where unstable staffing is negatively affecting team processes and collaboration. Early career teachers are eager to engage in leadership given supportive cultural conditions, relevant training and development, and school structures that encourage all members to contribute to the process. The aim of this action research study was to explore the understanding of teacher leadership through a PLC book study with 10 early career teachers at ABCES. The data revealed three themes, or domains, that work in concert to create conditions that support teacher leadership: communication, professional trust, and a culture of contribution. Emphasizing the importance of these three dimensions of school culture to collaborative team practices (e.g., instructional

planning, data discussions, giving and receiving feedback) will strengthen the educational process for all students.

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APPENDIX A
SELF-ASSESSMENT
ADMINISTERED PRE- AND POST-PLC

I consent to have my answers to these survey items included in a data set for the study being conducted by Laura Goldzung about teacher leadership and awareness. *

☐ Yes

☐ No

I am aware of the duties, decision-making, and problem-solving performed by teacher leaders in my school. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I am not aware of the scope of practice of teacher leaders in my school.



I have a comprehensive understanding of the scope of practice of teacher leaders in my school.

I am aware of how teacher leaders in my school work with diverse thinkers and personalities. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I am not aware of how teacher leaders in my school work with diverse thinkers and personalities.



I have a comprehensive understanding of how teacher leaders in my school work with diverse thinkers and personalities.

I am aware of the four dimensions of professional trust used by teacher leaders. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I am not aware of the four dimensions of professional trust or how teacher leaders use them.

☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

I have a comprehensive understanding of the four dimensions of professional trust and how teacher leaders leverage trust on their teams.

I am aware of how teacher leaders use data discussions to improve learning for all students. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I am not aware of how teacher leaders use data discussions to improve learning for all students.

☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

I have a comprehensive understanding of how teacher leaders use data discussions to improve learning for all students.

I am aware of formal and informal teacher leadership activities in my school. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

I am not aware of formal and informal teacher leadership activities in my school.

☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

I have a comprehensive understanding of formal and informal teacher leadership activities in my school.

APPENDIX B

PRE- AND POST-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Consider all of your experiences in a school setting. Please provide a description and/or definition of teacher leadership in your own words.
2. Consider all of your experiences in a school setting. Describe the work of teacher leaders.
3. What do you consider to be important personal characteristics for teacher leaders?
4. Describe the conditions necessary for teacher leaders to be successful in the school setting.
5. How do teacher leaders influence others inside and outside the school setting and/or organization?

APPENDIX C

REFLECTIVE JOURNAL PROMPTS

Week	Reading	Reflective Writing Prompt
Prior to Book Study Group (BSG)		What is teacher leadership (TL)? What does this term or concept mean to you?
1	<i>Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Helping Teachers Develop as Leaders</i> (2009) CHAPTER ONE	Examples of TL are all around you. Consider the definition of TL created by the BSG. Provide examples you see over the next week.
2	<i>Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Helping Teachers Develop as Leaders</i> (2009) CHAPTER FOUR	Think about someone you have worked with who was reluctant to join in change efforts to improve teaching and learning. Use the Factors Relating to the Uniqueness of TL (Figure 4.1 from the Chapter) to reflect on this teacher. How does embracing diversity in the workplace serve the mission of equity? Use a pseudonym to protect privacy.

3	<i>Adventures in Teacher Leadership: Pathways, Strategies, and Inspiration for Every Teacher</i> (2019) CHAPTER ONE	Think about your current communication loops within the building, with students, with parents, and with the community. What opportunities exist for you to strengthen your networks? How would this benefit all students? How does communication serve the mission of equity?
4	<i>Adventures in Teacher Leadership: Pathways, Strategies, and Inspiration for Every Teacher</i> (2019) CHAPTER FOUR	Reflect on the data discussion processes you have participated in as a teacher. Were they helpful? Did your conclusions lead to changing instructional practices or improving student outcomes? How do you work with other teachers and admin to identify your problem of practice? What action steps could a teacher leader take to improve the team process in the next meeting? The next quarter? The next year?
5	Compass Points Activity	Think about some of the problems, conflicts, and challenges faced by teacher leaders in our building. Can you think about some of the problems, conflicts, and challenges faced by teacher leaders in our building? Can you think about a particular incident where people who occupy opposing (or different) compass points needed to come to a consensus? Were they successful? What prevented or helped them

		succeed? How would an activity like this help a grade-level or school team leader? Was there a particular incident where people who occupy opposing (or different) compass points needed to come to a consensus? Were they successful? What prevented or helped them succeed? How would an activity like this help a grade-level or school team leader?
6	<i>Leading in Sync: Teacher Leaders and Principals Working Together for Student Learning</i> (2018) CHAPTER FIVE	Think about the four types of trust discussed. Refer to Figure 5.2 in the chapter. Reflect on your experience and write examples of each kind of trust that you have experienced in a positive or negative way.
7	<i>Leading in Sync: Teacher Leaders and Principals Working Together for Student Learning</i> (2018) CHAPTER TWO	What actions or inactions impact the implementation of shared vision? Draft a personal vision for your school through the lens of a leader. How would you bring others to share your vision? How would you come to consensus with others who have a different lens?
8	<i>Ten Roles for Teacher Leaders</i> (Harrison & Killian, 2007)	Harrison and Killian (2007) provided a nice description of 10 ways teachers can lead in the school setting. Many of the topics we've talked about center on the interpersonal communication skills needed to function effectively in one of these roles. Do you see yourself here? What role or roles do you play in our school and what interpersonal communication strengths do you use to "make it happen"? Conversely, can you provide an example of some other person in our school that fills a

		different role? What interpersonal communication skills do they use in this capacity?
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APPENDIX D

OBSERVATIONAL FIELD NOTES TEMPLATE

Week	Session Date	Book Study Group Topic
Speaker or time stamp	Observer's Field Notes	

APPENDIX E

SLIDES INTRODUCING ACTION STEPS TO ABCES FACULTY AND STAFF

Leadership is a Group Activity...

- Shared Leadership Model
 - ✓ Grade Level/Team Coordinator -- Management
 - Scheduling, Tasks, Due Dates, Communication
 - ✓ Grade Level/Team Instructional Leadership Council
 - Will work to implement/monitor/report out about the instructional program
 - ✓ Grade Level/Team School Culture Council (Sunshine +, events, recognitions)
 - Strengthen our school culture by supporting the SEL of the staff
 - ✓ Grade Level /Team SEL/PBIS Student Support Planning
 - Strengthen our school culture by supporting the SEL of the students
- Roles we will all have
 - ✓ **Contributors to the process - following**
 - ✓ Content leaders for your colleagues
 - ✓ Classroom leader for your students
 - ✓ **360° opportunities** (informal leadership and positive influence)
- MCPS Committees
 - ✓ Equity
 - ✓ Professional Development opportunities (e.g. Math Tasks, OG, IMSE)



How do you want to lead?

- Formal Leadership positions for 21-22 will include ongoing embedded PD. We will start in August 2021
 - Focus on **Instructional Leadership**
 - *Guidance and training* will be provided for task/calendar-driven management process
 - PD will be scaffolded, supportive, and address “just in time” topics
- As a whole staff, we will all engage in ongoing embedded PD related to **Fellowship & Contribution**
- Application to express interest for leadership positions for 21-22 will be available May 7, 2021

