

## Supporting Teacher Leaders: Principals' Views in Ten Selected South African Schools

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**ABSTRACT** Teacher leaders, both in formal and informal positions within the school, shape the implementation trajectory for better or for worse. While more is known about teacher leadership in general, little is known about how this phenomenon plays itself out in much of the developing world, including South Africa. Even less is known about what schools think and how they support teacher leaders in their schools. In this paper, the researcher employed a qualitative case study design to explore the views and practices of a sample of 10 selected principals on teacher leadership. In other words, the paper looks at “what is” in terms of the support and for teacher leaders by their school principals. The data from this paper illustrates that negotiating the space for teacher leadership is dependent on the principals’ understanding of the agenda for teacher leadership. The more the teacher leadership agenda fits into the school agenda in particular, the better the opportunities for it to flourish and vice versa.

### INTRODUCTION

According to Hanuscin et al. (2012), teacher leadership has been recognized as a necessary ingredient to support educational reform efforts. As a result, a number of interconnected factors argue for the necessity of teacher leadership in schools (Danielson 2009). “The culture of teacher leadership entails that teachers engage in professional dialogue with colleagues, share ideas, knowledge and techniques, participate in collaborative problem-solving around classroom issues, hone provocative lessons in teams, exhibit passionate professionalism and enjoy extensive opportunities for collegial professional dialogue” (Ghamrawi 2010: 315). In addition, Mokhele (2015) postulates that teachers are key actors and should be involved in the decisions made by the authorities. Teacher leadership has therefore become an important aspect of recent initiatives to enhance the profession of teaching in schools. However, in the South African context, the concept of teacher leadership is new and is slowly emerging as a new area of research interest (Grant 2008). Much of the literature has established the important role of leadership in the improvement of teaching and learning. Unfortunately, much of this research has historically focused on the role of the principal, thereby equating school leadership with the principals. Increasingly though, teacher leaders are also recognized as the “other key players” in

the school leadership as teacher leadership is essential to bring about change and improvement in a school. When teachers lead, they help create an environment for learning that has influences throughout the school community and affects students and teachers alike (Lieberman and Miller 2005). This idea is embraced by some principals while misunderstood by others, thus leading to confusion and a skewed perception as to how the role of teacher leadership corresponds with the overall school organization. However, Birky et al. (2006: 89) argue, “Although the importance of teacher leaders is recognized, teacher leaders are seldom effective in their roles without the support and encouragement of their administrator”. The paper therefore explores what kind of support is available for teacher leaders.

Teacher leaders as defined by Bowman (2004:188) are:

*Those teachers who maintain focus on student learning, seek lifelong learning for themselves, use facilitation and presentation skills, engage others in shared vision and meaning, develop and maintain relationships, work with a sense of integrity, and plan and organize.*

In addition to this definition, Harrison and Killion (2007) assert that teacher leaders assume a wide range of roles to support school and student success, whether these roles are assigned formally or shared informally they build the entire school’s capacity to improve.

Harris and Lambert (2004: 43) further define teacher leaders as “...expert teachers, who spend

the majority of their time in the classroom but take on leadership roles at times when development and innovation is needed. Teacher leadership has its core, “a focus on improving learning and is a model of leadership premised on the principles of professional collaboration, development and growth (Harris and Lambert 2003: 43). Teacher leadership therefore reflects teacher agency that is the school-wide work of teachers as supported through establishing relationships, breaking down barriers, and marshaling resources throughout the organization in an effort to improve the students’ educational experiences and outcomes (York-Barr and Duke 2004). A number of writers have cited the influence of teacher leadership on education processes while teacher leadership may influence many aspects of the educational process, the positive effects on the teacher leaders themselves have been the most consistently documented (York-Barr and Duke 2004). Frost and Durrant (2003: 178) suggest that through teacher leadership “teachers can make a major difference to the personal and interpersonal capacities of themselves and their colleagues, to pupils’ learning and to the organizational structures and cultures of their schools”. Larkin et al. (2009) further suggest that effective leadership acts as a catalyst for change, and is essential to implementing and sustaining curriculum reform efforts. According to Ryan (2006), evidence exists to support the assertion that as teachers lead, they grow in leadership skills and organizational perspectives. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) also suggest that empowering teachers to take leadership roles enhances their self-esteem and work satisfaction, which in turn leads to higher levels of performance due to higher motivation, as well as possibly higher levels of retention in the profession. This paper therefore aims at exploring what kind of support if at all principals give to the teacher leaders, as principals are expected to play a key role in developing teacher leadership. Currently, little is known about the relationship between the principals and teacher leaders or how the principal may influence the effectiveness of teacher leadership roles (Mangin 2007). Mangin (2007) further alleges that the importance of principal support for effective teacher leadership has been duly noted, yet little systematic evidence exists to substantiate how these two leadership positions interrelate or the kind of conditions necessary for effective coexistence. There are

however a few studies of principal leadership that offer insights into the relationship between principals and teacher leaders. One of the examples is that of Young and King (2002) where they found that principals can effectively promote school capacity (measured as teacher knowledge, professional community, and project coherence) by building connections to external sources of expertise or by building internal expertise. In their research, Young and King (2002) suggest that principals might invest in teacher leadership initiatives as a means for increasing internal expertise and improving school capacity.

### **Review of Relevant Literature and Theoretical Underpinnings**

The researcher frames research reported here using distributed leadership perspective. Harris (2004), Spillane (2006) and Timperley (2005) argue that distributed leadership provides a theoretically-grounded framework to examine leadership practice, the concept is relatively new, lacks a widely-accepted definition and has a limited empirical research base. More recent research calls for distributed forms of leadership where all teachers are viewed as having the capacity to lead and where power is redistributed across the organization (Grant 2008). A distributed leadership perspective according to Spillane et al. (2004) recognizes that there are multiple leaders and that leadership activities are widely shared within and between organizations. In their view, leadership arises not from formal title or responsibility but rather out of the interactions among individual, tasks and situations (Spillane 2006; Spillane et al. 2003). The core leadership functions in the school system that often get distributed by the principals using distributive leadership include setting the school mission, professional development programs, redesigning the organization, and managing instruction (Leithwood et al. 2007). Distributed leadership is therefore a non-hierarchical and inclusive leadership approach that fosters collaborative and ethical practice (Ryan 2006; Starratt 2004). Discussions of distributed leadership may end prematurely with acknowledgement that multiple individuals take responsibility for leadership within a school (Spillane 2006). Spillane (2006) further argues that it may be challenging for practitioners to understand the extent that the situation actually constitutes and defines

leadership practice through interactions between leaders and followers. The researcher's aim is therefore to explore how principals support if at all the teacher leaders in the school environment as Spillane's (2006) distributed framework gives minimal attention to the roles, responsibilities or circumstances under which the principal must exercise leadership. Distributed leadership is defined quite simply as 'engaging many people in leadership activity' (Spillane et al. 2003). It is premised upon leadership as a collective rather than a singular activity or entity. Spillane et al. (2004) contend that the idea of distributed leadership highlights the interdependence of the individual and the environment, and human activity is distributed in the interactive web of actors, artifacts and the situation. Spillane and his fellow researchers further argue that distributed leadership implies that the practice of leadership is one that is shared, and realized within extended groupings and networks, some of these groupings will be formal, while others will be informal and in some cases randomly allocated. It was therefore intriguing to explore the role of principals in encouraging and supporting teachers to become successful teacher leaders. In other words, the researcher strived to gain a better understanding of perceptions of teacher leadership roles from the point of view of the principals.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this study, the researcher employed qualitative research methods. Qualitative research methods provide insight into how people make sense of their experience, which is not easily achieved with other methods (Raid 2004). It is through this research approach that the researcher attempted to understand specifically how principals promote leadership in their schools. To collect the necessary data for this study, the researcher visited and interviewed ten principals in ten different schools several times over the period of data collection. The researcher also conducted several follow-up telephone interviews to solve some of the issues that emerged during the analysis of the data. When collecting the data, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with the help of a protocol of predetermined categories of questions, with all the ten principals. The researcher did this in order to establish the principal's general views on how they (principals) think of the

teacher leaders in their schools as well as how they support and encourage such leaders. All the participants were given consent forms and they understood the importance of their roles in this study and willingly agreed to participate.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A number of scholars have suggested ways in which principals promote teacher leadership in schools specifically through their support. Principals are aware that teachers are an essential part of school improvement, and must allow the teachers to assume the role of leadership within the school environment to allow for the success of the students. For teacher leadership to be successful, both the principals and the teachers must understand and value the importance of the position, and continually strive to communicate to enhance both the role of the principal and the role of teacher leaders. In this section, the researcher presents findings and discussions focusing on six major findings that have emerged from the data collected, namely curriculum and leadership issues, empowerment and staff development, policies that support teacher leader development, teaching and instructional material, barriers to supporting teacher leaders, and formal versus informal teacher leaders.

In sharing of these findings, the researcher also wishes to acknowledge the limitations of the research reported in this paper. The data presented in this paper focuses on the principals' responses only, and is silent about the responses from the teacher leaders.

#### Curriculum and Leadership Issues

When asked how they support the teacher leaders in their schools, the principals interviewed indicated how they support lead teachers in terms of monthly meetings. In such meetings they discuss the newly introduced policies, the progress in the classrooms as well as the discussions of the new curriculum.

*You see, we make sure that there is a meeting every month, it would be say...grade meetings or subject or phase meetings. We discuss policies, even school policies and the new curriculum, as you know that now we have CAPS in the system.*

To support the quotation above, in his research, Grant (2008) found that the principals and the majority of staff worked together and were involved in discussions regarding curriculum development in the school. In her research, Sherer (2008) also found that teacher leaders had three-hour meeting sessions that happened once a month on early release half days. The topics covered included problem solving in mathematics, reading strategies, power writing and test taking strategies. This researcher concludes that the teacher schedule was designed by principals and her leading team.

The principals who participated in the study further indicated that they also invite external subject specialists and also the specialists in leadership issues to workshop the teacher leaders. One of the principals commented said:

*Once in a while we invite people from outside the school to discuss the subject content with the HODs, and also somebody who would discuss and show them how to lead and run their departments.*

In agreement with the quotation above, in their research Spillane et al. (2001) found that principals drew on external networks to bring resources from local universities and education organizers in support of the schools' instructional program. One of the principals expressed her vision:

### **Empowerment and Staff Development**

The principals interviewed for the purpose of this study also indicated that they also provide time and space for the teacher leaders to attend and participate in the professional development workshops (subject, new curriculum and the leadership workshops).

*The teacher leaders go to the workshops throughout the year and we make sure that they never miss any of these workshops, as many of these workshops are for this new curriculum and others are subject matter workshops.*

In support of the above quotation, Muijs and Harris (2003) suggest that for a successful leadership in schools "support from the school's management team for teachers' professional development by providing time and resources for continuing professional development activities and by validating the concept of teacher leadership is necessary".

While focusing on this theme, the principals interviewed also indicated how they support the

lead teachers in their schools to participate in teacher leader clusters.

One of the principals described his vision as below.

*Some of the head of departments (HODs) also participate in cluster meetings, you find that HODs from different schools meet and discuss some issues concerning their subjects, and we let them go and participate in these clusters.*

In support of the quotations above, Wahlstrom and Seashore Louis (2008) acknowledge that many studies found that principals play an important role in allocating time for teachers to meet and for providing increased opportunities for job-embedded professional development.

### **Policies in Support of Teacher Leader Development**

The principals interviewed in this study commented on the importance of policies in supporting the teacher leaders' activities. One of such policies as they noted includes the "personal administrative management". This policy supports teacher leaders in terms of their subject teaching allocation. With this policy, teacher leaders ought to have few subjects to teach as they have extra administrative work. The other policy is that of "public finance management act". With this policy, teacher leaders get financial support to travel and participate in professional development workshops.

One principal shares his views as below.

*You see, in many issues, we are also guided by a number of policies that help us support the lead teachers. There is PAM (personal administrative management) policy. With this one, we know that we somehow have to cut the teaching load of the teacher leaders as they have other things to take care of. As I said, we also provide financial support for teachers when they go out to attend the workshops. In that case we are guided by the finance management act. So we don't just do things from our heads.*

In her research in support of these policies, Harris (2007) agrees that principals and those in senior leadership roles need to ensure that overload and role conflict are avoided by providing adequate time for the leadership tasks required.

### **Teaching and Instructional Material**

The school principals who participated in this study indicated that they support teacher lead-

ers with teaching and instructional support materials as well as science equipment and library materials. It was also interesting to learn that teacher leaders are also provided with laptops and that they have individual office spaces.

*All the other teachers sit in the staff room, but with the teacher leaders or the HODs, we make sure that they have their separate office so that they can focus, we have also provided them with laptops since they have to type the minutes of the meetings and so on.*

The support of the principals is important for teacher leadership. To emphasize this point further, York-Barr and Duke (2004) assert that the relationship established between teacher leaders and their principals is consistently identified as a strong influence on teacher leadership. This is further strongly supported by Crowther et al. (2002: 33) when they say, “Where we have seen teacher leadership begin to flourish, principals have actively supported it or, at least, encouraged it”.

### **Barriers to Supporting Teacher Leaders**

In support of the teacher leaders, principals interviewed for the purpose of this study indicated that they are also faced with a number of challenges. They mentioned that one Head of Department (HOD) is responsible for more than one subject, which is a challenge in that such a leader cannot be a specialist in all the subjects.

This emerged as no surprise, as it is not uncommon in South Africa. In her research, Mokhele (2011) found out that one provincial policy coordinator who has a PhD in environmental education has a responsibility of coordinating and providing assistance to subject advisers of agricultural sciences, nature conservation and in environmental education.

The principals who participated in the study also noted that as much as they do have the informal teacher leaders in their schools, there is no specific formal job description for the informal teacher leaders. They also concluded that it is sometimes difficult to support teacher leaders financially especially with “no fee schools”.

### **Formal Versus Informal Teacher Leaders**

It was interesting to explore how principals work with formal and informal teacher leaders. As indicated by the principals interviewed, both

teacher leaders (formal and informal) are provided with equal opportunities by their principals. The only difference is that formal teacher leaders are paid for their positions as HODs by the Department of Education while the informal teacher leaders are not paid for their roles as informal teacher leaders.

One principal commented:

*You see, besides the HODs, we do have other teachers who are doing well when it comes to leadership. We therefore support such teachers the same way as we do the HODs. We somehow find it important to acknowledge such teachers even through the Department of Education does not recognize them as teacher leaders.*

In support of the quotation above, in their research Jita and Mokhele (2013) agree that instructional leadership is distributed across the education system and the schools. Jita and Mokhele (2013:134) further argue, “It is not only the people who are in formal hierarchical positions that provide all the leadership on what is taught, how and with what resources in the various school subjects. Leadership resides and is practiced at different levels of the hierarchy, including by teachers who sometimes occupy no formal positions in the school organizational hierarchy”. It is therefore clear that teacher leaders do not wait to be appointed to a formal role before they offer their expertise and influence others in order to impact the educational experience of the students (Hatch et al. 2005).

### **CONCLUSION**

Throughout the data collected in this study, the school principals perceive that they support their teacher leaders irrespective of their formal and informal positions. This goes back to the distributed leadership framework that was employed in this study where some scholars acknowledge that distributed leadership implies that the practice of leadership is one that is shared, and realized within extended groupings and networks, some of these groupings will be formal, while others will be informal and in some cases randomly allocated.

This paper concludes that the more support by school principals, the more success in teacher leadership. This makes sense as the pivotal role of the principal in facilitating productive teacher leader-principal relationships is emphasized in the literature. Without the principals’

understanding of how and when to support the teacher leaders, it does not become easier for the teacher leaders. For the teacher leadership to be successful in schools, there are certain structures that are needed. Such structures as suggested much in the literature include culture of distributed leadership in a school and that would be where teacher leaders are supported specifically by their principals.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

It is imperative that principals support the teacher leaders as the success of teacher leadership in schools depends on the understandings and cooperation between the principals and the teacher leaders.

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