

Research Article

Evolving Identities: Understanding the Development of Teacher Leaders Across Their Careers

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine how teacher leader identities evolve across different career stages. The succeeding research posits that teacher leadership challenges the conventional leadership model where leadership is invariable in nature. To help answer this question, the study relies on constructs and framework of social theory of learning. These frameworks help to explore identity development within the context of education practice. The study also connects teacher leadership models and the career stage theory to frame leadership identity as a developmental trajectory whose scope is negotiated over a professional lifespan. The study is constructed as a narrative inquiry with narrative synthesis of existing literature. The use of narrative synthesis for the data analysis involved the use of text to explain the findings. The synthesis process then allowed for an organization of the primary themes capturing the trends and variations in the data.

Keywords

Teacher Education, Leadership, Profession, Career

1. Introduction

Teacher leadership is when teachers actively take on challenges that are outside of the classroom with the view of shaping positive practice outcomes. Teacher leadership is interpreted as a collaborative process that demands the integration of soft skills and knowledge science to impact on collective goals. An especially defining aspect of teacher leadership is that it is not reliant on traditional formal positional titles [7, 9]. Teacher leadership as an overarching priority emerges from a science of instruction that is actively shifting from teaching to learning [2]. The goal of this philosophical departure is to create instructional practices that equip learners with an in-depth knowledge of core concepts. This ideal state can only be attained by creating a culture where teachers collaborate in leadership to drive con-

text-specific change. Notably, teacher leadership is exhaustively studied as a product of individual competencies and broader systemic reform. However, what remains understudied is how teacher leadership identity is experienced over the career continuum. Accordingly, this study is guided by the following central question: How do teacher leader identities evolve throughout their careers?

Notably, the study of teacher leadership and the underlying evolutionary processes hold the answers to a dynamic and effective educational ecosystem. This discourse would uncover how teachers develop the autonomy and capacity to make purposeful decisions. Moreover, this analysis also carries the potential to answer questions that touch on industry-wide problems such as staff development and retention.

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The present discourse forms a robust means to reproduce a theoretical synergy. Herein, it would be possible to foster teacher agency and collaboration which are crucial ingredients for innovation and progressive development. Notably, these two variables have a strong say into teacher job satisfaction and their willingness to engage in ongoing education. For instance, teacher involvement in leadership helps them to exert influence beyond the classroom [9]. As a consequence, teacher leaders have a say in school-wide reform initiatives which include professional development. Overall, understanding the mechanisms behind the evolution of teacher leadership identity sets the stage for a broader interrogation of teacher roles outside of the classroom.

This article is organized into six sections with the theoretical framework providing the conceptual rules to interpret related phenomena. This section is followed by the review of literature whose purpose is to map out the current literature on teacher leader identity and its context-mediated temporal progression. This sets the stage for the findings section which outlines a synthesis of the main themes emerging across research. Going forward, the discussion section seeks to put these findings into context by interpreting them using the selected theoretical lens. The article closes with a summative take into the implications of teacher leadership trajectories with special focus on leadership development and future direction.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Identity Theory and Professional Growth

This study stems from an interest to understand how leadership identity develops throughout the teacher's career. The definition of teacher leadership deployed is borrowed from the work of [7, 9] who define it as a formal and informal collaborative process that sees teachers' role extend beyond traditional instructional roles. Subsequently, this study uses Gee's [3] seminal work asserting that identity is inherently tied to contextual performance. Specifically, Gee argues that whenever people interact, they are assigned a particular identity unique to that particular set of circumstances [3]. Notably, this performative identity differs from what is otherwise known as a core unchanging identity. Gee's work implies that identity is thus a social construction which in the case of teachers is born from how the education ecosystem acknowledges them. Thus, colleagues, the administrative, and policy structures can nurture teachers by affirming and legitimizing individual acts of leadership.

2.2. Teacher Leadership and Career Stage Models

Wenger's social learning theory compliments the insights from Gee [3] by deconstructing the formation and continual

reinforcement of performative identities. When applied to teacher leadership, Wenger's social learning is evident from the point where teachers engage in shared social practice within their particular physical and social practice communities reproducing the theory's first component of learning as experience. Through shared practice, teachers also learn leadership through active engagement. In the more advanced stages of learning, teachers derive a sense of belonging from being part of the practice community. Lastly, the constructed identity reaches an apex at which point the individual owns the leader identity. From Wenger's [11] framing, identity is perceived as a process that is constantly in motion with individuals navigating a trajectory where identity and practice are mutually constitutive.

The definition of teacher leadership identity used in this study demands a consideration of how the broader process of leadership and career development intentionally influence leadership identity. Here, the teacher leader model contends that leadership growth derives from deliberate and progressive expansion in domains such as instruction, collaboration, and systemic strategy. Notably, this growth process is normative with a progressive shift away from the classroom and towards institutional advocacy. Alongside this, the distributed leadership theory seeks to challenge the conventional notion of leadership being a combination of discreet functional duties [5]. This model reimagines leadership by accentuating interdependent interactions and the multiple sources of governance at work in any one organization.

In parallel, the transformational leadership theory and the career stage theory reorients the discourse towards the inter-related effects of personality and environment on leadership. First, the transformational leadership model is founded on the assumption that leadership development is anchored upon the inseparable interplay between personality and environment [12]. This supposition markedly changes understanding of what leadership constitutes at both the individual and institutional level. Lastly, frameworks from the career stage theory, such as Huberman's teacher career lifecycle model, reinforce the idea of leadership as a product of time and experience [6]. Informed by these intersecting theories and models, it is hypothesized that teacher leadership is a dynamic, relational, and temporal construct that comes to life as the teacher interacts with elements of their environment.

3. Review of Literature

3.1. Emergence of Teacher Leadership

There is a broad body of literature pointing to the requisite conditions for emerging teacher leadership. The evolving contemporary policy discourse appears to be the force behind teacher leadership. Teachers are increasingly being repositioned to take an active role in system-level reform. Harris [5] note that teacher leadership is widely accepted as a means of effectively replacing passive subservience which prevents

teachers from actively contributing to systemic transformation. Indeed, teacher leadership is positioned as having a well-established connection to systemic improvement in schools. The specific linkage is due to factors such as teachers taking an active role in catalyzing and translating pedagogical change.

The research reviewed contends that there is a growing discourse that assigns teachers political roles within their professional communities. Within this context, teachers demonstrate a greater readiness to exercise leadership when they occupy collaborative networks defined by horizontal rather than vertical hierarchies [9]. Specifically, beginner teachers taking part in a collective program inherited a discourse identity defined by pedagogical language and practice [2]. Research from Booth [1] expands on this narrative by noting that practice environments supportive of professional development allow teachers to autonomously identify areas of learning where they would wish to invest. Equally, teacher leadership, as explored in the recent literature, is a product of crisis periods such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Here, teachers assumed power traditionally wielded by senior leadership which they then use to deploy alternative teaching modalities and solve related problems.

3.2. Identity Formation in Teachers

Current literature challenges the traditional notion that formal and informal leadership are exclusive. This position captured in the study [8] who exemplify how mid-career teachers integrate leadership into their classroom practice without necessarily pursuing formal leadership positions. In practice, individual teachers stand out as a source of peer support even such functions are not formally recognized. This research serves as a definitive ground supporting how informal collaboration supports conventional teaching work while serving as a source of growth. Most crucially, it is the evident from the findings of Brandon and Kern [2] that teachers serving in these informal leadership roles end up owning this leader identity even when not supported by vertical career growth. Notably, identity in these district roles was the product of informal negotiations. For instance, teachers reported acknowledging the mutual gains derived from not just leading but also allowing others to lead [2]. With a structure that supports collective initiative, teachers can contribute to strategic roles without abandoning their primary duty to the learner. Another salient strand from the literature touches on the tensions and dissonance that emerge from a widened scope of practice when teachers stand as leaders [7]. In responding dilemma, most research efforts appear to agree that role dissonance is a threat to the enactment of unique duties attached to distinct roles.

3.3. Leadership as a Development Process

Reflective practice is arguably one of the effective means

for professional longevity. This finding connects to the broader question of how leadership evolves over the teacher career [6]. A consistent theme across the body of literature on contemporary teacher leadership is that it fundamentally contradicts the traditional leadership paradigm where authority flows down a hierarchical structure. This theme is further seen in the work of [10] which offers an analysis of how veteran teachers navigate mentorship using informal relational interactions. Also true is that the emotional complexities of leadership are most pronounced during periods of crisis. Specifically, the leader identity is tested by a demand for coherence and value in the midst of disruptive requirements. A key issue to point out is that like [7] have pointed out emotional labor is an often ignored source of emotional strain for teacher leaders due to the added workload.

3.4. Influences on Identity Evolution

The nuances in teacher leadership definitively suggest that identity best evolves where there is a systematic support model. In expanding on this theme of forces that shape identity evolution, recent research reveals the capacity for virtual and non-hierarchical contexts to decouple the influence from formal hierarchies. The modern education context is one that is markedly shaped by technological advancements. The emerging digital spaces in the education sector have come with the possibility for teachers to enact leadership without following conventional scripts [9]. Participants in the study by Shal [9] reported that collaboration in virtual spaces allowed for participative leadership rather than that born from formal titles. In sum, the research suggests that the democratization of leadership practice is powerful trend legitimizing identity evolution.

System policy pressures are represented in research as carrying the potential to either catalyze or deter teacher leadership identities. For instance, the urgency arising from crisis events create an incentive to embrace teacher leadership. However, in the absence of sustained support for strategic thinking, leadership roles ultimately fade [4]. In their study, Ghamrawi [4] reported that participants perceived the conditional nature of teacher leadership. Therefore, the existing research conceptualizes teacher leadership as a fragile identity that must be protected particularly in the face of changing institutional circumstances.

4. Findings

4.1. Emerging Identity

Primary findings from the extant research suggest that teacher leadership is not exclusive to positional authority but is instead grounded in technical expertise. The duality of teaching and leadership emerged as a relational force born from professional positioning rather than from a prescribed function. This finding is closely aligned with Wenger's [11]

idea of identity where participation precipitates becoming. The consensus in research is also consistent with the teacher leader model standards where leadership arises from the progressive expansion of influence rather than a deliberate transfer of position. At the core of these findings is the evidence of weaknesses inherent to role-based leadership. Instead, interest shifts to frameworks that define identity as practice.

4.2. Negotiating Roles

Findings further indicate that the teacher leader identity is an iterative process where influence is negotiated rather than a linear outcome. Research converges on the common conclusion that as the leadership identity evolves teachers must toggle between the conventional teaching role and emerging leader roles. In this regard, the body of research collectively points to social recognition and cultural permission as the primary forces from which leadership identity originates. Notably, these findings echo the frameworks underpinning this study. Specifically, the link to Gee's [3] framing of identity and the distributed leadership model is discernible from research. Most importantly, leadership identity exists both as an individual phenomenon and as a product of administrative, peer, and cultural expectations. This means that in evolving to become a teacher leader, individual professionals must navigate these complex expectations.

4.3. Reinvention and Legacy

Despite the broad alignment evident in the body of research, there is a prominent conceptual gap. Specifically, the research acknowledges the role that experienced teachers play in creating a stable teaching environment. However, the theory for this element of teacher leadership appears underdeveloped. For instance, there is almost exclusive view of mentorship as a function rather than as part of a process culminating in late-career competencies. This gap in research justifies research to reconceptualize this key aspect of teacher leadership. Overall, this gap sets the stage for a discourse to capture the core practices of teacher leadership and the place of reflective reinvention in the evolution process.

4.4. Influence of Context

Lastly, the findings from this study reveal that the context within which teacher leader identity occurs has a strong influence upon the trajectory of this process. Across the studies reviewed, context emerges consistently as the force that defines the teacher identity trajectory. For example, contexts such as virtual communities have a positive effect on teacher leadership because they legitimize this role. In other contexts, such as those dominated by rigid policies, the negotiated leadership identity is significantly eroded [8]. In following the broader theoretical framework these findings further underscore the nature of teacher identity as a relational force rather

than one is individually possessed.

5. Discussion

5.1. Interpreting the Findings Against Theoretical Frameworks

The data confirms that teacher agency represents the point of departure for intentional professional judgment, a precursor for effective teacher leadership. The recognition of teacher agency as a professional and political resource has shifted the narrative from leadership as role-based to leadership as practice enacted through distributed, networked professional relationships. The power of collective action to build individual capacity is further revealed through findings showing how peer transactions support the transfer of technical language. In this way, agency takes on the form of a mediating force through which teacher leadership is not only constituted but also maintained. The dynamism inherent to teacher leadership means that it remains contingent upon an organizational climate supportive of agency.

The literature reflects agreement that the genuine involvement of teachers in educational reform aggregates to transformative empowerment. Within such crisis contexts, there is a higher degree of teacher-led instruction suggesting a marked shift away from top down administration of learning [4]. Most importantly, teachers in these crisis situations took on mentorship roles and actively sought to reproduce change in their teaching environment [4]. However, a challenge emerges in that in the absence of formal support systems, teacher leadership is ultimately superseded by hierarchical norms. This suggests that teacher leadership, despite developing organically, requires deliberate efforts to shape and sustain the culture of devolved leadership.

5.2. How Identity Evolution Reflects the Interaction Between Personal Agency and Organizational Culture

The data also reveals how professional communities stand out in their support for role fluidity where teachers can transition from practice, learning, and leadership. The dynamic nature of collegial communes supports relational identities where professional roles are highly fluid [2]. Teachers working in organizations that embraced collaborative practice were able to oscillate from class practice to peer leadership as guided by their community's needs. Thus, collective agency is most accurately characterized as a practical and customizable strategy to nurture teacher leadership. In viewing leadership as a collective process, research effectively challenges the leader-follower dualism that is rooted in traditional education leadership.

5.3. Connections to Professional Learning, Teacher Retention, and Leadership Sustainability

When teachers become leaders, whether formally or informally, they must then cope with several challenges. The first of these is a heavier workload from combined classroom and mentorship duties. A secondary effect of this additional workload is risk of identity dissonance due to commitment to often competing roles. These findings suggest that even as teacher leadership expands opportunity, the overall efficacy of teacher leaders can suffer due to the resulting emotional strain. From this research a question emerges as to the extent to which it is possible to resolve the tension between values inherent to leadership and classroom duties.

Research reveals a pattern where experienced teachers continually engage in a process of reflective reinvention. Teachers who maintained an internal belief in their duty to contribute to the school's well-being had a higher level of personal fulfilment than those who relied more on formal recognition. Here, the research uncovers what could be described as a paradigmatic shift where teachers view career progression not as winding down but an ongoing process of adaptive reinvention [6]. It is revealed that over time, teachers develop an intrinsic commitment to a system-wide growth in student learning. In doing so, teachers model a form of leadership rooted not in positional authority but in the constructive potential to continually shape practice.

Mentorship is a locus for identity reconstruction as experienced teachers use collaborative practice to negotiate authority. Rather than impose their expertise, mentors recruit mentees as partners in an undertaking of professional inquiry. Moreover, experienced teachers deliberately removed themselves from being seen as part of a supervisory system and instead sought to create a form of professional co-presence [10]. Together, these insights signify that identity awareness is instrumental for high quality developmental and relational processes in the education system.

5.4. The Cyclical and Relational Nature of Teacher-leader Identity Formation

Amid systemic challenges teacher leaders practice adaptive resilience by taking on affective labor, further stretching their professional identity. During such times, experienced teachers step up to help to absorb and regulate their own emotions and those of others. Teacher leaders take on an identity-stabilizing role whose ultimate outcome is collective morale. It is at this point that the connection between emotional labor and teacher identity crystallizes. Leadership identity is said to manifest when the teacher successfully deploys skills such as reflection and affirmation to create harmony between their identity and role.

Even though the significance of teacher leadership is well established in research, it is also clear that its realization is

constrained by several contextual and systemic barriers. Data from studies such as [8], the unimpeded evolution of teacher leadership relies heavily on whether their organization creates a space that recognizes their agency. When teachers perceive that their agency is invited and recognized, they are more likely to develop competencies needed to function within a professional environment. Conversely, where a support culture was lacking, the resistance typical to top hierarchical systems manifested. These nuances definitively suggest that identity best evolves where there is a systematic support model.

6. Conclusion

The process through which teacher leadership evolves over the teacher career is central to understanding the fundamental qualities of leadership. The analysis of data from research on the topic points to an identity process that is dynamic and relational. This process is also influenced by context to produce an unconventional form of leadership. Another key insight from the data is that teacher leadership is far-removed from the traditional leadership which is in nature static and a recluse of a few individuals in the organization. Instead, teacher leadership is derived from daily practice and mutual recognition. For this reason, active participation in professional communities is a key requirement for sustainable teacher leadership. Moreover, it emerged that this leader identity manifests through contribution but is strained by dissonance or policy conflict. Nonetheless, teacher leadership can thrive where system structures support mentorship and collective agency. This means that teacher leaders thrive where the organization's cultural ecology allows for value and visibility. Going forward, the future of research on this topic should focus on the specific areas of transition in teacher leadership. This means adopting both longitudinal and relational methodologies. This approach would help to uncover the influences that emerge over time and across transitions. Equally, there are opportunities to uncover areas where to leverage current knowledge by advancing techniques available to nurture leadership identity cultivation programs. In doing so, it would be possible to attain a leadership ecosystem that exists beyond the current pipeline methodology.

Author Contributions

Louis Langdon Warren is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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