Teacher leadership in Anglican Schools: Research in-progress.

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This paper reports on a research study into teacher leadership within Anglican schools in South-East Queensland. While teacher leadership has become a hot topic in Anglican education, there has been no formal policy on teacher leadership in Anglican schools and little was known about teacher leadership in action within this system of schools. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to develop a more informed and sophisticated understanding of teacher leadership in Anglican schools, with the intention of developing both policy and practice in this area. This study was situated within a theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism. Sixteen teachers across three Anglican schools participated in this study and multiple methods were used in the collection, analysis and interpretation of data. Although this study, at the time of writing this paper, is a work in-progress, the researcher has identified a number of research findings in respect to the teachers’ perspective on teacher leadership behaviour, motivations and feelings. These findings highlight the multi-dimensional nature of teacher leadership, the ups and downs of this leadership activity as well as suggesting support for those who wish to engage teacher leadership into the future.

Introduction
This paper provides an account of a research study in the area of teacher leadership. The impetus for this study was a pragmatic concern for teacher leadership. There are significant challenges confronting schools today as they attempt to adequately prepare students for the twenty-first Century. New times call for a new measure of leadership.

Thus a new paradigm of the teaching profession is needed, one that recognizes both the capacity of the profession to provide desperately needed school revitalization and the striking potential of teachers to provide new forms of leadership in schools and communities (Crowther et al, 2002, p.3).

Recognizing the need for a new paradigm of the teaching profession, the Anglican Schools Commission in Queensland has been active in promoting teacher leadership within its schools. However, it was soon recognized that this policy direction was not
supported by research. Indeed, researchers had found that probing the work of teacher leaders is exhilarating in that it reveals aspects of the teaching profession that are largely obscured in the educational literature and in current practice (Crowther et al, 2002, p.9). To offset the lacuna in the research literature, this research study was designed to investigate teacher leadership in South-East Queensland Anglican Schools in order to gain a more informed, sophisticated understanding of this phenomenon. Whilst this research study remains a work in progress, it is possible to share tentative findings and conclusions with the educational research community.

The Research Problem and Purpose

The literature contains many understandings about teacher leadership (York-Barr & Duke, 2004, p.260). Researchers have made varied claims about the roles and responsibilities of teacher leaders, and both formal and informal versions of teacher leadership are advanced. Initially, researchers accepted a conceptualization of formal teacher leadership and focused their effort only on teachers who assume formal, positional leadership roles. An overview of this early research (Smylie, 1997) found that these teacher leaders either leave the classroom at least for some of the time to conduct their leadership, or receive a time release and/or additional remuneration to complete their extra responsibilities. Moreover, it is noted that these formal teacher leaders tend to see leadership as being separate from classroom work, or view administrative-like tasks, rather than curriculum tasks, as the primary vehicle for leadership. Yet again, these teacher leaders are more likely to assume a supervisory role and rely on managerial, top-down approaches to leadership.

This conceptualization of formal teacher leadership has proved attractive to policy makers in an era of widespread restructuring that is premised on fiscal efficiency and organizational effectiveness. Initially, the advent of restructuring, and in particular school-based management as a central aspect of it, has had significant reverberations on the role of principals in government schools. Restructuring policies aimed at transferring more functions and responsibilities to schools, at improving their performance, and at holding them to account for that performance, have focused attention on the importance of leadership at the school level, and in particular, the leadership provided by principals (O Donoghue & Dimmock 1998, p.14). Noting the unrealistic expectations of the principal in an era of change, the Australian Principals Associations Professional Development Council (APAPDC) has identified the need to extend the concept of school leadership beyond school principals to include teachers in positions of responsibility (DEST 2000, p.10). Hence there are claims that teacher leadership appears to be inseparable from successful school reform as it is currently envisioned (Crowther et al., 2002 p. xix).

Formal teacher leadership has, however, been subject to strong criticism as researchers ask whether teacher leadership is simply a new form of managerialism (Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2006, p.43). Noting the labelling of teachers as leaders, research in England and New Zealand has found that:

As the professional leader of the school, the Headteacher/Principal became individually responsible for the quality of teaching and learning. As the de facto
chief executive officer (CEO) was directly accountable for school outcomes and was supported by a senior leadership/management team that was comprised of associate, deputy or assistant principals. Between this senior level and the teachers were a group of middle leaders or managers who act as a policy conduit. Schools as organizations, therefore, have become a mirror image of the business world, and this is reflected in the terms used to describe the work of some teachers (such as chief executive or manager) and the accompanying hierarchy that placed some teachers in an authoritative role over others. (p.43)

Given this development, theorists (Lieberman & Miller, 2004) now advance a conceptualization of informal teacher leadership that focuses on informal, in-class teacher leaders without formal leadership positions. This newer understanding of teacher leadership suggests a less formal approach that is more fluid and engages many teachers rather than the chosen few (Lingard et. al, 2003). In addition, it is closely linked to leading learning where teacher leaders who remain in the class use curriculum and relationships as the vehicle and vision for actions on behalf of work with children and there is an orientation towards children and learning conducted with others (Rinn, 2003, p.24). Finally, this conceptualization is associated with relational approaches to leadership with in-class teacher leaders moving from helper, to initiator, to collaborator, to leader capable of motivating others (p.41) within and beyond their classrooms.

Within this conceptualization of informal teacher leadership, there are arguments for restructuring schools around the core imperatives of educational leadership, namely, leading for student learning and student achievement. For Fitzgerald and Gunter (2006) this imperative raises the question How can schools, teachers and students be organised to ensure that the leadership of learning is fundamental to what occurs? (p.52). In response to this question they argue that:

Leading learning at any level in a school involves the act of influencing and working with others in a highly collaborative, collegial and supportive environment that encourages risk and innovation and which places learning at the centre of all activities. The leadership of learning is not necessarily taken by those with formal responsibility that is denoted by a title or label. (p.53)

Interestingly, this thought is supported by Australian researchers (Andrews & Associates, 2004) who have found teacher leadership of learning to be an essential ingredient of school revitalization. However, this research has also highlighted the need for parallel leadership (Crowther et al, 2002), or a strong working relationship between principal and teacher. Parallel leadership is a process whereby teacher leaders and their principal engage in collective action to build school capacity. It embodies mutual respect, shared purpose and allowance for individual expression (p.38). Here, teachers as leaders are responsible for pedagogical development and the principal (and other administrative role-holders) responsible for strategic development (p.44).

This theoretical development means that a variety of conceptualizations of teacher leadership, ranging from formal to informal versions, are available to policy-makers. Consequently, when seeking to further teacher leadership in Anglican schools in South-East Queensland, the Anglican Schools Commission must consider these very different conceptualizations of this phenomenon. Hence, the purpose of this research study was identified in terms of developing a more informed and sophisticated understanding of
teacher leadership in South-East Queensland Anglican schools. There was an instrumental purpose for this study as it was hoped that this understanding would guide system authorities and school personnel as they considered the way forward in policy and practice.

The Research Questions

From the outset of this study, it was recognized that teacher leadership represented an educational change. Therefore, guided by the seminal writing of change theorist Michael Fullan (2001), this research study focused on teacher leadership from the perspective of teachers in Anglican schools in South-East Queensland. For Fullan, meaning making is at the heart of educational change with key actors, in this case teachers, needing to have a clear idea *what* should change and *how* they should go about it. Consequently, one major research question and a number of sub-questions were identified:

How do teachers in South-East Queensland Anglican Schools conceptualize teacher leadership?

What activities do teachers in South-East Queensland Anglican schools associate with teacher leadership?

What do teachers in South-East Queensland Anglican schools understand to be the purpose of teacher leadership?

What feelings do teachers in South-East Queensland Anglican schools associate with teacher leadership?

What factors do teachers in South-East Queensland Anglican schools believe enable and inhibit teacher leadership?

Theoretical Framework

With this research purpose and the research questions in mind, this research study was situated within a theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2006). Emanating from within the sociological research tradition, symbolic interactionism offers a way of studying individual self-identity and the process of role-making. Symbolic interactionism advances a new understanding of role identity within social situations. In this theoretical perspective, roles or behavioural expectations are framed as a set of rules (Charon, 2004, p.168) that are governed by negotiation. Thus the enactment or performance of the role is variable given that there is some choice in whether or not to perform this role and that there is the opportunity to reject expectations attached to a position occupied or to modify performance called for (Stryker, 2002, p.79).

In short, symbolic interactionists highlight the role played by symbols in the process of social interaction and role negotiation. Symbols, in the form of language and other gestures, are seen as social objects used by the actor for representation and communication (Charon, 2004, p.48), for thinking and social interaction. Thus, symbolic communication facilitates joint action by collectives (p.17) or the social organization of different acts by diverse participants. Consequently, a social situation is deemed
problematic if individual living and working together have not developed a shared symbolic language that, in turn, serves to facilitate symbolic communication and joint action by the collective. A social situation will also be problematic if there are not shared expectations of roles. Without such clarity, individuals experience role conflict (Stryker, 2002, pp.73-76) as they face excessive or contradictory role expectations. In addition, role conflict for the individual across the organization will result in role strain as reflected in the continual problem of maintaining continuity of social roles that underlies the stability of social structure (p.76).

The Design of this Study

The decision to situate this study within a theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism had implications for the design of this study. As an interpretive/constructivist research method, symbolic interactionism is concerned with coming to understand the common set of symbols and understandings that have emerged to give meaning to people's interactions (Best & Kahn, 2006, p.255). To this end, symbolic interactionism accepts two principles of investigation (Charon, 2004). Firstly, symbolic interactionism is primarily concerned with understanding what the actors themselves believe about their social world. Secondly, this research is conducted in the real world and adopts careful, critical, systematic and objective approaches, in order to be accurate and consider the perspective of the actors.

Given these research concerns, this research study was framed as a case study (Merriam, 1998) with the boundaries of the case being three Anglican schools in South-East Queensland. In addition, the selection of participants for this case study research was non-probabilistic and purposeful sampling (pp.61-62) and the following criteria were used in this selection process:

∀View classroom teaching as their primary, full time responsibility;
∀Recognized as teacher leaders in their school communities;
∀Nominated by their peers as teacher leaders;
∀Peer nominations confirmed by their department heads and principals;
∀Available for interaction with the researcher;
∀Consent to interviews and possible observation on site;
∀Have a genuine desire to engage in leadership activities within their school.

Five teachers from each school were selected. In total there were 15 participants in this research study. This size sample will ensure an adequate number of participants (p.64) are engaged to explore the research problem from a variety of perspectives.

In line with symbolic interactionism, the design of this study involved two stages: exploration and inspection (Charon, 2001, p.208). The exploration stage was designed to gain an understanding of teachers' perspectives on what's going on around here, by describing in detail what was happening in respect to teacher leadership within the school. The inspection stage was the second step and involved an in-depth investigation of specific issues raised in the exploration stage.

Stage One - Exploration
Stage one of the data collection involved the use of Experience Sampling Method (Hektner, Schmidt & Csikszentmihalyi, 2006). This refers to a technique of gathering data that is designed to allow people to document their thoughts, feelings and actions within the context of everyday life. Experience sampling method makes use of an electronic devise to page the subject several times a day. In response to this signal, participants chart the course and experiences by completing a short survey of their current activities, thought companions and feelings. Experience sampling method allows the researcher to study experience in the natural contexts of everyday life (p.4) and thus provides a richly detailed picture of the day-to-day lives and emotions of participants.

In adopting experience sampling method, this research study used mobile telephone technology to communicate with the participants. Participants were sent a short message service (SMS) text message 5 times a day for one week between the hours of 7.30am and 10.00pm weekdays, and between 9.00am and 10.00pm on weekend days. The times of each message varied each day but remained within a two-hour time slot. The messages were sent simultaneously to all 15 participants mobile telephones via a single email message. Upon receipt of each SMS message, participants were asked to complete an experience sampling form within 30 minutes of receiving the text message. This form asked participants: What are they doing? Why are they doing it? And how they are feeling? The participants were able to complete the experience sampling form anonymously, recording their feelings as they conducted different activities associated with their teaching and leadership.

Stage two - Inspection
The inspection stage involved focus group interviews. A focus group interview was conducted in each of the three schools with the five teachers from that school involved. These focus group interviews were tape recorded to capture the potentially rich data, transcribed and checked with the participants for accuracy. The analysis of data followed as soon as possible after the focus group sessions were concluded.

Following data collection within the exploration and inspection stages, the researcher adopted a three step approach to interpretation (Neuman, 2006, p. 160). The first step, a first-order interpretation, involved learning about the research problem from the meaning ascribed by the informants to the study. The second step, the second-order interpretation, involved looking for patterns or themes emerging from the data. The third step, the third order interpretation involved the researcher considering the general theoretical significance of the research findings.

The Findings

The use of multiple research methods and this three-step iterative process of data interpretation resulted in a rich picture of teachers perspectives of teacher leadership in South-East Queensland Anglican schools. Although this research study has yet to be completed a number of findings have been identified.

1. Teacher leadership is mostly unrecognised in the field
Within this study, it was interesting to note the diverse range of work related activities identified by participants during this research study. In the Stage 1 Exploration, participants identified a range of activities that were initially categorized in terms of teaching/instruction, preparation/correction/reporting/ administrative/ routine matters, extra curricula activities, staff related activities, interviewing, and excursions.

These categories seem to fit with the four key elements of informal teacher leadership identified in the literature, namely, classroom teaching, leading beyond the classroom, improving educational practice, and principled action (Crowther et. al, 2002; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Lambert 2003). Here, participants identified classroom teaching activities involving facilitating, coaching, mentoring, providing of feedback or counselling. Leadership activities beyond the classroom involving other adults included in-service for staff and educational programs for parents. Improving educational practice involved curriculum planning with colleagues and writing for a professional magazine. Finally, there was principled action involving participants putting themselves out for others, and taking on more than might be expected of them as classroom teachers (eg. Taking extra classes, and deliberately choosing to teach a low level class to assist those students requiring extra help, even though this provided greater challenge, or meant giving up some of their own time).

In Stage 1 Exploration, participants identified a range of diverse, work related activities that seemed to fit with an understanding of teacher leadership in the literature. In Stage 2 Inspection, the researcher was interested to find out whether these teachers saw these activities as leadership. Here participants proved to be reticent to identify themselves as teacher leaders.

My vision of leadership is the team captain with a ‘follow me boys’ sort of attitude, and I don’t see myself in that role (Participant H).  

I don’t see myself as a leader. I don’t see myself as doing anything extraordinary (Participant A).

Yeah. I was thinking about this as we were doing it, and I thought, I don’t know why I am involved because I’m not really a leader (Participant C).

This was interesting given that they had been invited to participate in this study following nomination as teacher leaders by their peers, their department head and their principal. Despite this endorsement, the above comments suggest that these teachers continue to see leadership in terms of the traditional understanding of the leader-hero with leadership being the prerogative of those with formal leadership roles. This conceptualization of teacher leadership is more in line with formal teacher leadership rather than theoretical development in respect to informal teacher leadership.

2. Teachers saw the purpose of teacher leadership in terms of leading learning.

During the exploration stage of the study, seven broad purposes of teacher leadership were revealed: assist students, assist colleagues, assist parents, personal satisfaction, routine, professional development and it’s my job. The focus group interviews were
designed to reveal the more intimate thoughts of the participants in respect to the question of purpose. Here participants spoke of their intentions in terms of:

∀To be a support system for a lot of my kids (Participant F);
∀We've got experiences that we can help them with, mentor, delegate, support (Participant L);
∀To enhance the learning experience for students (Participant B).

Responses in the focus group interviews suggested that participants had a clear purpose in mind as they went about their work, and more often than not their primary purpose was to assist students. This thought was further developed as they discussed the significance of their role in enhancing student learning:

I think most people have the idea that they can actually contribute to the experiences the kids have (Participant D).
You want to add value to the learning experience in the classroom (Participant A).

For these teachers their purpose was clear - student learning. This understanding of the purpose of teacher leadership is in line empirical data from a research project conducted in England and New Zealand that revealed how teachers who were all labelled leaders or managers understood their roles as leading learning (Fitzgerald, Gunter & Eaton, 2006).

3. Teachers are positive about the possibility of teacher leadership.

In Stage 1 Exploration, participants reported both positive and negative feelings as they went about their daily activities. However, during the focus group interviews, participants spoke in very positive terms about their work. Here their comments reflected feelings of satisfaction, enjoyment, support, pride, respect, admiration, intrinsic motivation, feeling good, love and passion. In short, there seemed to be a true sense of commitment to their school, their students and their profession. As participants noted:

∀It's just the right thing to do (Participant J)
∀It makes you feel good (Participants G, I, F)
∀It's almost egotistical sometimes (Participant L)
∀You wouldn't do it if you didn’t love it would you? (Participant F)

The phenomenon of flow identified by Csikszentmihalyi (2003) may help to explain these positive feelings. These participants seem to be in the zone, almost carried away by an outside force, moving effortlessly with a current of energy, at the moment of highest enjoyment (p.39). Perhaps this statement from one participant best summarises this situation:

Isn't that the essence of teaching? I mean Andy Thomas has gone into space because it's the ultimate of his profession and they’re constantly seeking to go further and further and further. But isn’t that the point of our profession, that we seek to give those experiences to more and more kids as they become available? So it's constantly seeking to push the limits of our own profession. We're not
astronauts, we’re teachers and that’s the way we do it. It is sheer enjoyment (Participant C).

Interestingly, teachers with formal leadership responsibilities appeared less positive about this leadership experience. It seems that formalising a teacher leadership role creates new managerial expectations from the administration, which are not always welcomed by the recipient.

The extra time off class is not always time that can be devoted to your new [formal] leadership anyway, because suddenly there is a whole lot of other stuff that came with the job that you weren’t told about, and you’re trying to squash lesson planning in and all this other stuff. I think to some extent that’s why some teachers that exhibit leadership skills will never take those positions (Participant C).

Ironically it was noted that the formalisation of a role can prevent the informal teacher leader from doing their best work.

You’re drawn away from class, and you’re added more and more garbage responsibility, you’re not given any extra benefits for it, in fact you’re losing more time with your students (Participant D).

This formalisation of the leadership role creates role conflict for the participants as they are taken away from their informal teacher leadership work and assume extra administrative duties. There is also role confusion when the teacher leaders and the principal have different expectations about the priorities of their work. When, for example, there are different perspectives on the time required for teacher leadership activities teachers become skeptical about their teacher leadership:

If you want to assume leadership, you are taking more work on, and then when you are doing more work, you’re always struggling with the time factor. It comes back to you having less time. What you would spend x amount of time on before, that’s now x minus whatever, so I think it could have a negative effect on the main part of your work if you assume more work (Participant E).

4. A professional learning community is a significant source of support for teacher leadership.

The question of support for teacher leadership was introduced to the participants during the Inspection Stage of the study. Here, responses within the focus group interviews identified a number of factors that enabled and inhibited teacher leadership. Most of the conversation centred on the positive relationships, and professional development that suggested the need for further structural reform.

Relationships
Participants repeatedly highlighted the importance of relationships that enabled them to work as teacher leaders in their schools.
Our ability to establish relationships. Whether it's with our students or whether it's the banter around the staffroom, but the relationships I think are so important, and I think if you have got an open relationship then you are able to say to someone, 'why don't you try this' or 'do you think this might help your teaching practice further?' without intimidating them or them seeing it as you coming down on them. (Participant D)

As a consequence of good staff relationships, these teachers assisted each other through running computer inservices for colleagues (Participant D); team teaching (Participant G); sharing resources with colleagues (Participant I); preparing leadership lectures for staff (Participant N); professional sharing with English teachers (Participant B).

The importance of positive relationships between teachers and the administration, particularly the principal, was also highlighted.

Well they've got their own agenda driven by whomever up there, and I think it can be very easy to forget how much prep time goes into delivering a one hour lesson, and I think perhaps we do have different agendas and I don't think very often they meet (Participant B).

Professional development

Relevant professional development was also identified as an important enabling factor in teacher leadership:

I wish there was more chance for more effective structured professional development that's internal. You don't need to bring in people from outside all the time (Participant D).

However, there was also a great deal of frustration expressed about the type of professional development being undertaken in the schools:

I go to PD days sometimes, you know student free days, and the whole day is mapped out for you and I think, 'nothing on that agenda is relative (sic) to me in the classroom, yet I'm going to be here for 8 hours and not a sentence is going to impact on me in the classroom' (Participant C)

At the same time, participants highlighted the value of informal professional development through collegiality that was largely instigated by the teachers themselves:

There are different aspects that each teacher brings with them, whether they are a beginning teacher or a teacher with a particular role within the year level, there's a sense of energy around that person creating some kind of forward motion (Participant I)
I like the support of my teaching colleagues. I look to a more senior teacher as sort of a role model and always ask for feedback on whether or not I am doing the right thing, if I am on the right track etc (Participant F). We are lucky to have teaching teams in the middle school that work so well together (Participant G).

This type of professional development was deemed relevant and rewarding for the participants. Meaningful professional development experiences are instrumental in enabling teacher leaders to meet their full potential. Teacher leaders are invariably connected in a multitude of ways with the professional development of others. By becoming staff developers, coaches, and mentors and by offering technical assistance, teacher leaders share their knowledge with their peers (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001, p.38).

Structural reform

Within the literature there are strong arguments for structural reform to create the necessary conditions for teacher leadership (Starratt, 2003). Such reform, in turn, will require:

A paradigm shift in how we think about the management and purpose of school: from hierarchical, factory model institutions where teachers are treated as semiskilled assembly line workers, process students for their slots in society, to professional communities where student success is supported by collaborative efforts of knowledgeable teachers who are organized to address the needs of diverse students. (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p.332).

Within this study, participants seem to understand this need for this paradigm shift as their conversations within the focus groups suggested the development of a new professional community. Hoad (2004) has identified five interdependent dimensions of a Professional Learning Community in terms of shared vision and values, collective learning and application of learning, support administrative conditions, shared personal practice and shared leadership. This understanding incorporates notions of teacher leadership by establishing a collaborative culture with an inquiry focus on student learning. Hence, it seems that structural reform in support of the professional development learning community would be welcomed by the participants in this study.

Conclusion

This paper provides an account of a research study that focused on the issue of teacher leadership in Anglican schools in South-East Queensland. Having identified that there was no clear way forward in respect to advancing teacher leadership, this research study sought to develop a more informed and sophisticated understanding of this phenomenon by exploring teacher perspectives of teacher leadership in Anglican schools. Although this study remains a work in-progress it is possible to offer some tentative conclusions.
Firstly, it is interesting to find that the teachers who participated in this study were reticent to label themselves as teacher leaders. This finding was intriguing given that the work related activities identified in this study reflect the various elements of teacher leadership identified in the literature. Moreover, their primary purpose at work was clearly to influence (lead) student learning outcomes. The value of their activity had also been recognized by their peers, their department heads and their principals. So are they teacher leaders? The answer to this question seems to depend on one’s theoretical conceptualization of teacher leadership. These teachers are not teacher leaders in the managerial sense of having out-of-class, formal leadership responsibilities. However, the work they do and the recognition they receive within their school community suggest that they are indeed doing something special beyond teaching. Within the literature this something special is conceptualized as informal teacher leadership. Considering what these teachers do and their motivation for doing it as well as the recognition they receive for their leadership, it is reasonable to conclude that they have unconsciously and spontaneously adopted that demeanor of a teacher leader.

Secondly, it is surprising to find overwhelming positive feelings about their work within and beyond the classroom. Here, participants expressed satisfaction, enjoyment, support, pride, respect, admiration, intrinsic motivation, love and passion. These positive feelings imply that teacher leadership can well be nurtured given the right environment. However, participant responses reveal that skepticism with teacher leadership will emerge if this environment is not supportive. To date this study has found that strong relationships with colleagues and administration, together with relevant professional development and appropriate structural support, will provide this right environment. It short, it may be concluded that these teachers are recommending the development of a professional learning community (Hoad, 2004) in support of teacher leadership.

Finally, there is a warning to be found within these findings. In instances where the teacher leadership role has been formalized, participant experience suggests that role conflict may eventuate, as managerial expectations get in the way of educational change and leading learning. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, this feature of formal teacher leadership implies that teachers and the school administration do not have a shared symbolic language that, in turn, serves to facilitate symbolic communication and joint action by the collective. This interpretation supports the need for further role negotiation at the local school level, and collaborative policy-development at system level, to tap the full potential of teacher leadership.

References


