



## RESEARCH REVIEW

# Joellen Killion

## Critical questions remain unanswered in research on teacher leadership

### ► AT A GLANCE

Research on teacher leadership shows promise but insufficient empirical evidence of its benefits and supports.

### ► THE STUDY

Wenner, J. & Campbell, T. (2017).

The theoretical and empirical basis of teacher leadership: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Literature*, 87(1), 134-171.

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**Joellen Killion** ([joellen.killion@learningforward.org](mailto:joellen.killion@learningforward.org)) is senior advisor to Learning Forward. In each issue of *The Learning Professional*, Killion explores a recent research study to help practitioners understand the impact of particular professional learning practices on student outcomes.

### ► WHAT THE STUDY SAYS

**M**ore than a decade after the last comprehensive literature review on teacher leadership, researchers conclude similar findings and challenges exist in the more recent studies analyzed.

### STUDY DESCRIPTION

In 2004, Jennifer York-Barr and Karen Duke published a seminal and comprehensive review of the literature on teacher leadership between 1980 and 2004. This study examines literature published between that study and 2013.

As the interest and implementation of teacher leadership grows and accountability measures within schools expand and morph, this new review sought to expand the understanding of the field both within the framework established by York-Barr and Duke and beyond it.

For the purpose of this review, Wenner and Campbell define teacher leaders as “teachers who maintain K-12 classroom-based teaching responsibilities, while also taking on leadership responsibilities outside of the classroom” (p. 140).

### QUESTIONS

Wenner and Campbell based the research questions on those used by York-Barr’s and Duke’s 2004 comprehensive literature review and added to the list.

1. How is teacher leadership


defined in the research, and what are the constructs/elements of teacher leadership within these conceptualizations?

2. To what extent and in what ways is teacher leadership being investigated within the different disciplinary contexts? What theories are used to frame research surrounding teacher leadership?
3. How are teacher leaders prepared, and what strategies or programs appear to be most fruitful for developing teacher leaders?
4. What are the effects of teacher leadership?
5. What factors facilitate or inhibit teacher leadership?
6. To what extent and in what ways does the research surrounding teacher leadership investigate issues of equity and diversity?

### METHODOLOGY

Wenner and Campbell established search and inclusion criteria to frame their review of the literature. Those criteria included their definition of teacher leaders, high-quality empirical research focused only on teacher leaders, peer reviewed, and with teacher leadership as central to the research, and occurring between January 2004 and December 2013.

These criteria led to establishing criteria for exclusion that included



**This study calls for thoughtful consideration of the preparation and continuous professional learning of teacher leaders as well as for engaging underrepresented teachers in leadership roles.**

studies that were purely descriptive studies, had five or fewer subjects, subjects not working in K-12 education, or subjects who no longer had classroom teaching responsibilities; on implementation of programs using teacher leaders; in which teacher leaders participated as a part of a larger leadership group; and in which teacher leadership was peripheral to the study.

Wenner and Campbell identified 704 studies on teacher leadership that occurred during their time frame. After applying the criteria and more in-depth analysis, the researchers determined that 54 studies met the criteria for inclusion in the review.

The most common reasons for eliminating studies included descriptive studies, non-peer-reviewed, teacher leaders as a part of a larger leadership

group, teacher leadership as peripheral to the research, and no triangulation of data.

### ANALYSIS

The researchers reviewed and annotated each study independently and collaborated on their analysis of each study to determine its contribution to the review.

When questions or disagreements occurred, Wenner and Campbell used the original studies and discussion to resolve them.

They noted the following description of the 54 included studies:

- 74% used qualitative methods and/or used multiple methods;
- 80% depended on interviewing for data collection;
- 6% were book chapters;

- 15% were dissertations;
- 79% were published in peer-reviewed journals;
- 30% focused on the conditions affecting teacher leaders;
- 24% focused on teacher leaders' activities;
- 17% focused on evaluating teacher leader preparation programs; and
- 24% were studies occurring outside the United States.

### RESULTS

Wenner and Campbell concluded that the findings from research on teacher leadership in this most recent decade parallel those of the previous two decades. A synthesis of the findings related to each research question follows.

## ► WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PRACTITIONERS

This review of research on teacher leadership may seem disappointing, yet rather than emphasize what the research fails to support, it identifies the areas that require careful attention from practitioners and researchers.

Practitioners who want to elevate the significance and visibility of their teacher leadership efforts have a responsibility for clearly defining teacher leadership, establishing its purpose and theoretical framework, creating the conditions and structures that support it (see *A Systemic Approach to Elevating Teacher Leadership*, Killion et al., 2016), preparing and supporting teacher leaders, and evaluating the effects of teacher leadership on teacher leaders, their colleagues, their school, school system, and communities, and their students.

In addition, since the most common role of teacher leaders is supporting the professional learning of their colleagues, it is imperative that teacher leaders understand and apply the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning

Forward, 2011) within their practice and for designing, implementing, and evaluating the professional learning that occurs within school.

This study also calls for thoughtful consideration of the preparation and continuous professional learning of teacher leaders as well as for engaging underrepresented teachers in leadership roles. All efforts to engage, prepare, and support teacher leaders and those who are responsible for supporting and supervising them are other opportunities for applying the Standards for Professional Learning.

## REFERENCES

- Killion, J., Harrison, C., Colton, A., Bryan, C., Delehant, A., & Cooke, D. (2016).** *A systemic approach to elevating teacher leadership*. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward. Available at [www.learningforward.org/docs/default-source/pdf/a-systemic-approach-to-elevating-teacher-leadership.pdf](http://www.learningforward.org/docs/default-source/pdf/a-systemic-approach-to-elevating-teacher-leadership.pdf).
- Learning Forward. (2011).** *Standards for Professional Learning*. Oxford, OH: Author.

## Definition of teacher leadership

Wenner and Campbell conclude that most research studies fail to adequately define the construct of teacher leadership and the theoretical frameworks upon which the studies are based. As a result, it is difficult to form consensus about what teacher leadership is.

Five themes emerged from the research related to the definition of teacher leadership.

They are: Teacher leadership goes beyond the classroom walls; teacher leaders should support the professional learning in their schools; teacher leaders should be involved in policy- and/or decision-making at some level; the ultimate goal of teacher leadership is improving student learning and success; and teacher leaders work toward improvement and change for the whole organization.

The lack of a common definition of teacher leadership and a common theoretical framework contribute to

confusion within both the research and practice. Wenner and Campbell note, “[T]his muddiness could lead to inconsistencies between the research literature on teacher leadership and local enactments of teacher leadership” (pp. 157-158).

## Teacher leadership in different disciplinary contexts

More than a quarter of the studies focused on teacher leadership in the content areas, with the most studies in literacy/English, followed by math and then science. The number of studies in any one discipline makes it difficult, according to Wenner and Campbell, to form any conclusions about teacher leadership in different disciplines.

Further research, they note, on how the disciplinary idiosyncrasies especially related to ways of knowing influence the selection and work of teacher leaders, and how that work influences student learning in various disciplines.

## Theoretical frameworks for research in teacher leadership

Thirty-three studies referred to at least one theoretical framework. The most common framework was distributed leadership, mentioned in 10 studies with democratic/constructivist leadership, structure, and agency, parallel leadership, transactional leadership, and communities of practice being other common theories identified. A total of 26 theoretical frameworks were identified in the 54 studies.

York-Barr and Duke noted the lack of a common theoretical framework guiding research on teacher leadership and proposed one for use. Only one study applied their framework. Wenner and Campbell conclude that the field of teacher leadership is *partially theoretical* and call on researchers to address this limitation. The lack of a common theoretical framework further confounds findings from the research on teacher leadership.

### Effects of teacher leadership

Referring to their 2004 review, York-Barr and Duke said, “The literature is relatively rich with claims of the potential and desired effects of teacher leadership and relatively sparse with evidence of such effects, especially at the levels of classroom practice and student learning” (p. 282).

Wenner and Campbell concur. They find two primary areas of effects in the research. The first is on teacher leaders themselves, with four themes emerging: stress/difficulties as a teacher leader (9% of the studies), changing relationships with peers and administrators (15% of the studies), increased positive feelings (percent of studies not noted), and professional growth (percent of studies not noted).

The second area of effects of teacher leadership is on colleagues. The effects noted include a sense of empowerment and professionalism for all colleagues, contributions to professional growth and learning for colleagues, school improvement, and change in school culture.

No research in the body of literature reviewed examined the effects of teacher leadership on student learning, an evident omission especially given a common purpose for teacher leadership. Wenner and Campbell call on researchers, particularly in the current climate of increased accountability, to close this gap and acknowledge that the gap may affect policies related to teacher leadership.

### Factors inhibiting and facilitating teacher leadership

Four themes emerged as inhibitors of teacher leadership: insufficient time, poor relationships with peers and administrators, climate and structural factors, and personal characteristics.

Many teacher leaders feel overwhelmed and struggle to find time with their teaching responsibilities.

Insufficient principal and peer support impede teacher leaders from fulfilling their responsibilities.

Insufficient trust, authority, autonomy, lack of appreciation, and resentful or resistant colleagues also complicate the work of teacher leaders. Climate and structural issues such as communication, vision, and resistance to change interfere with teacher leaders’ success. Lastly, teacher leaders who lack confidence, resist change, or are novice leaders often were not credible to their colleagues.

Facilitators of teacher leadership parallel the inhibitors. Facilitating factors include professional development in content, pedagogy, and leadership skills; participation in networks of other teacher leaders; sufficient resources; clear administrative support and encouragement; appropriate autonomy to make decisions; productive working environment including scheduling time, clear norms of trust, share leadership, risk-taking, and continuous learning; defined responsibilities and job descriptions; and compensation or recognition. In many cases, principals are responsible for establishing the facilitators of teacher leadership.

### Teacher leadership’s relationship to issues of diversity and equity

Wenner and Campbell included this new question to respond to the changing demographics in schools and because they recognize how it influences who becomes teacher leaders and how those who assume leadership support the diverse populations of both teachers and students they serve.

Only five studies explored this question. They examined areas such as encouraging and studying teachers of color in leadership roles and raising teacher leaders’ critical consciousness to address social justice, equity, and equity through professional development.

Wenner and Campbell note, “[G]iven the current educational, social, and political contexts, it was surprising these were the *only* issues surrounding equity and diversity found in this collection of literature” (p. 156). They add, “Given the rapidly changing world of education as well as the populations found in schools, this manifests as an unacceptable oversight” (p. 159). In addition, it is surprising that there are so few studies focused on these crucial issues.

Many of the same challenges York-Barr and Duke noted in their review of the literature on teacher leadership persist more than a decade later. Many of the research recommendations they offered, note Wenner and Campbell, remain important gaps to close, especially with the increased focus on teacher leadership in school reform and teacher performance arenas.

They call for more focused research on a variety of areas, including effective models of teacher leadership, effects on student learning, clearer definitions, streamlined theoretical frameworks, and more attention to the role of teacher leaders in issues of diversity and equity.

### LIMITATIONS

The limitations in this study result primarily from the literature available rather than the research methodology. While altering the search and review criteria may change the results, the consistency of criteria across the earlier and this current review add value to field in identifying what is known and what remains unconfirmed by empirical research.

### REFERENCE

York-Barr, J. & Duke, K. (2004). What do we know about teacher leadership? Findings from two decades of scholarship. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(3), 255-316. ■