

**WHEN TEACHERS LEAD:
An Analysis of Teacher Leadership in One Primary School**

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While teacher leadership is a concept that lacks consensus in the literature and may be underexplored in schools, it is a practice that is worth pursuing for its many cited benefits to school improvement. However, the extent to which teacher leadership thrives in any school is dependent on school conditions such as principal support and school culture. This is evident in an analysis of teacher leadership episodes from one primary school in Trinidad, which the author undertook in order to identify the supportive structures as well as barriers to teacher leadership. Evidence on teacher leadership from developed countries such as the USA and the UK, where the concept is more widely known, was used to form the analysis, which revealed an emergent form of teacher leadership existing at the school.

Introduction

Having had the opportunity to observe the work of teachers in very different school contexts over a number of years, it appears that there are some teachers who, in the interest of improving the learning opportunities for their students and raising the standard of professional practice, extend themselves by taking on extra responsibilities. The actions of these teachers have come to be recognized in the literature as *teacher leadership*.

In this paper, research-based conceptualizations of teacher leadership are used to gauge the extent to which this phenomenon existed in one primary school in Trinidad. Consequently, reflections on teaching episodes at this school have been presented and analysed to identify the conditions that facilitated teacher leadership, as well as the barriers that hindered not only its emergence and maintenance but also the school's use of teacher leadership for school effectiveness and improvement. Successful teacher leadership and its benefits are examined and, finally, possible areas for research are identified. The objectives of this conceptual paper are: (1) to provide an overview of teacher leadership; (2) to raise awareness of its existence and potential for school improvement in Trinidad and Tobago schools; and (3) to highlight the

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need for empirical studies into the phenomenon of teacher leadership in the nation's schools. A review of the literature on teacher leadership follows.

Conceptions of Teacher Leadership

The literature provides different conceptions of teacher leadership, which Harris and Muijs (2005) assert “clearly delineate” from traditional ideas and approaches of leadership. To appreciate what they mean, an extended definition of traditional leadership is proffered, followed by various conceptions of teacher leadership as provided by several authors.

Coleman (2005) affirms that traditional leadership tended to be associated with one person, such as a principal of a school, giving rise to the “great man” theory of leadership (Murphy, 2000) or the idea of the “heroic school leader” (Hallinger & Heck, 1999, p. 185, cited in Ribbins, 2001). Related to this conception is the notion that leaders possess special traits with which they are born. This idea negates the need for leadership training and development. Such leaders have followers and may be effective in one context but not another (Coleman, 2005).

More recent conceptions cast leadership as “fluid and emergent” as opposed to “fixed” (Gronn, 2000, p. 333), and is most effective when shared (Gronn, 2003; Harris, 2008; Spillane, 2006), culminating in “total leadership” (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006). Such leadership is about learning and “constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively” (Lambert, 1998, p. 5), which leads to positive change. It is within this schema that teacher leadership is situated.

Interestingly, *teacher leadership* is not a term used by teachers in schools (Muijs & Harris, 2006). However, research suggests that such a concept exists, though definitions of the concept vary slightly within the literature (Muijs & Harris, 2006). In the USA, Canada, and Australia, the concept of teacher leadership, according to Hopkins (2001), is particularly well developed and evidenced by empirical data. While in the UK, the concept has recently emerged, but is gaining momentum (Day & Harris, 2002; Frost & Durrant, 2003b; Harris, 2003b; Muijs & Harris, 2003).

Little (2003) charts the development in the USA over a 14-year period, and finds that teacher leadership has undergone marked changes. Using case study data, Little notes that in the 1980s teacher leadership was limited to leadership of subject departments, but by the mid-1980s it became profoundly associated with imposed school reform, as was later seen in Canada in the 1990s (Anderson, 2004) and in the late 1980s in the

UK (Reid, Brain, & Boyes, 2004). This period of reform in the USA, in particular, was characterized, according to Little (2003), by conflict over the meaning of teacher leadership. In more contemporary times, teacher leadership has come to be equated to intensification of labour (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2002; Bottery, 2002; Hargreaves, 1994, all cited in Little, 2003) or to an “expanded” role for teachers (Hoyle, 1980; Lieberman & Miller, 1990, both cited in Little 2003). Bascia (1997) contends that “these expanded notions of teacher’s work are sometimes characterized as teacher leadership” (p. 69).

Anderson (2004) believes that “teacher leadership means to set directions and influence others to move in those directions. It is a fluid, interactive process with mutual influence between leader and follower” (p. 100). Apart from the outright reference to a leader-follower connotation, which is unpopular in such a discourse (Gronn, 2000; Harris, 2003b), and the ambiguity implied by “mutual influence,” the leadership of teachers in this definition appears to be autocratic. In 2003, a project, which was commissioned by the General Teaching Council for England and the National Union of Teachers (NUT; the largest teacher union in England) “to investigate the extent to which teacher leadership had cogency in the UK,” defined the concept as “the capacity for teachers to exercise leadership for teaching and learning within and beyond the classroom” (Muijs & Harris, 2006, p. 963). Frost and Durrant (2003b), choosing to be concerned only with the work of informal teacher leaders, assert that teacher leadership involves “managing change through collaboration,” “experimenting with practice,” [which is action research] and “gathering and using evidence” [data richness] (p. 171). Muijs and Harris (2006) agree that collaboration is necessary for teacher leadership. They maintain that “teacher leadership is conceptualized as a set of behaviours and practices that are undertaken collectively,” and “is centrally concerned with the relationships and connections among individuals within a school” (p. 962). They extend the discourse on teacher leadership by showing its close connection with distributive leadership, purporting that it is:

conceptually narrower, being concerned exclusively with the leadership roles of teaching staff, while simultaneously being broader than many practical operationalisations of distributed leadership that have often concentrated on formal positional roles, in particular those relating to middle management and subject leadership. (p. 962)

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But what is distributive leadership? Distributive leadership first appeared in the leadership literature in the late 1950s (Harris & Muijs, 2005). According to Harris (2008), it is a form of lateral leadership, where the practice of leadership is shared amongst organizational members and is, therefore, seen as “the product of conjoint agency” (p. 175) that comes about by “decentr[ing] the leader” (Harris, 2003b, p. 317). It is not misguided delegation; rather, according to Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2001), the task of leadership is accomplished through the interaction of multiple leaders, over whom the leadership function is “stretched.” Empirical evidence indicates a strong correlation between patterns of distributed leadership and organizational performance (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2007). However, Hargreaves and Fink (2006) say that distributive leadership “is sometimes bad leadership” (p. 106), explaining that fewer leaders rather than more is better. Melnick (1982) agrees, believing that such sharing of leadership leading to ambiguity is one of six obstacles to effective team performance. But Sergiovanni (2001) advocates high “leadership density,” in which more people [teachers] are involved in the success of the school.

Teacher leadership, like distributive leadership, is believed to emerge within the organization in order to solve problems or take action (Harris, 2003a). Despite whichever conception of teacher leadership is held to, its “emphasis upon collective action, empowerment and shared agency is reflected in distributed leadership theory” (Harris, 2003b, p. 317). Also, whether teacher leadership is perceived as a process, capacity, or a set of actions, or is exercised within a formal role or not, what is important is that teachers work collegially while leading the improvement of professional practice and student learning, in ways that are duly aligned to the school’s vision.

Teacher Leaders: Who Are They? What Qualities Do They Possess?

Barth (2001b) holds fast to the belief that “all teachers can lead.” Whether this is so or not, certainly not all teachers aspire to leadership. Two questions beg to be asked: Who, then, is a teacher leader? What qualities and skills does he/she possess? Patterson and Patterson (2004) answer the first question by defining a teacher leader as “someone who works with colleagues for the purpose of improving teaching and learning, whether in a formal or an informal capacity” (p. 74). It is widely agreed that formal teacher leaders have recognized titled positions or legal authority (Bascia, 1997; Birky, Shelton, & Headley,

2006; Wasley, 1991) for which they would have applied, been selected, and, ideally, received training (Danielson, 2007), as well as compensated with additional or higher salaries and/or a lighter classroom teaching load (Birky et al., 2006). Narratives from teacher leaders dishearteningly suggest that the latter is only a fantasy (see Little, 2003; Reid et al., 2004). Examples of formal teacher leaders include heads of departments, senior teachers, union representatives, and curriculum leaders. A less formal teacher leader is identified by one respondent in the Reid et al. (2004) study as the teacher who accepts delegated responsibility, usually from the principal.

Conversely, informal teacher leaders are those who assume the role regardless of position or delegation (Bascia, 1997). Bascia refers to this type of leadership as “invisible”—a reference that may be inappropriate when the work of even these informal teacher leaders extends beyond the classroom. Frost and Durrant (2003a) assert that *informal* should not simply be taken to mean the absence of a formal position, but, more significantly, be used to define that teacher who has chosen to contribute to school improvement. Danielson (2007) sees informal teacher leaders as “emerg[ing] spontaneously and organically from the teacher ranks” (p. 16) to take on a number of responsibilities on their own volition. Wasley (1991) gives some idea of these responsibilities. He states that informal teacher leaders:

are recognized by their peers and administrators as those staff members who are always volunteering to head new projects, mentoring and supporting other teachers, accepting responsibility for their own professional growth, introducing new ideas, and promoting the mission of the school. (p. 112)

From Wasley’s definition, some of the qualities that teacher leaders—not just informal teacher leaders—possess can be gleaned. Firstly, they are risk takers who display optimism about teaching and learning (Lieberman, Saxl, & Miles, 2000), and so are “always volunteering” and “accept responsibility for their own professional growth.” Also, “mentoring and supporting other teachers” suggests that teacher leaders are respected for their own teaching capabilities by fellow teachers and administrators alike, as found by Danielson (2007), and that they are versed in subject content as identified by Nieto (2007) and Lieberman et al. (2000).

Other attributes include open-mindedness, ability to collaborate effectively, respect for the views of others, and flexibility (Danielson, 2007; Lieberman et al., 2000); all of which are necessary when working with colleagues, who pose a very different set of challenges for teacher

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leaders than those posed when working with students (Danielson, 2007). Frost and Durrant (2002) recognize the nature of such work, and highlight the following qualities and skills that are observable in teacher leaders: “Considerable sensitivity in working with colleagues; the need for determination, patience and conviction; and gentleness, coupled with persistence” (p. 151). These attributes suggest that the exercise of teacher leadership is not always fluid, as will be discussed when the issues and barriers to teacher leadership are examined later in this paper. Teacher leaders’ roles and responsibilities are now addressed.

Roles and Responsibilities

A third question warrants consideration: What do teacher leaders do? Whether formal or informal, teacher leaders, as mentioned previously, take on a number of roles and responsibilities. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001, p. 17) identify three facets of teacher leadership:

- (1) “leadership of students and other teachers” as mentor, coach, facilitator or curriculum specialist
- (2) “leadership of operational tasks,” including keeping the school organized and on course to its vision
- (3) “leadership through decision making,” or partnership with fellow teachers in committees or with businesses within the school’s immediate community.

Barth (1999, cited in Harris & Muijs, 2005) views teacher leadership as fulfilling some of the functions that would normally be undertaken by school administrators, such as “choosing textbooks and instructional materials; shaping the curriculum; setting standards for pupil behaviour; deciding on tracking; designing staff development programmes; setting promotions and retention policies; deciding school budgets; evaluating teacher performance; selecting new teachers; and [even] selecting new administrators” (pp. 24-25). Other researchers, such as Danielson (2007), Gehrke (1991), Harrison and Killion (2007), and Lieberman and Miller (2004), identify quite similar functions, though they may condense them into dimensions or separate them into very distinct roles.

While many of the roles and responsibilities of teacher leaders may be similar across different school contexts, some functions will be context specific, as evidenced in Nieto’s (2007) study. She observed quite a different set of functions of the teacher leaders when teaching multicultural students in the USA. These teacher leaders believed in, and advocated for, public education. They “challenged conventional

wisdom” through their genuine respect and high expectations for students, and through their belief in the intellectual ability of teachers. Nieto (2007) adds that they question taken-for-granted assumptions about knowledge and improvise where necessary. These teacher leaders also modelled social justice, as well as used their influence inside and outside the classroom.

The consideration that now comes to the fore is that of school conditions. It would seem that in order for teacher leaders to carry out such roles and responsibilities, and function as they do, as reported by Barth (1999, cited in Harris & Muijs, 2005), Danielson (2007), Nieto (2007), and other researchers mentioned, school conditions that allow teacher leadership to thrive are likely to be present. A look at teacher leadership in successful schools, headed by successful principals, should provide a useful frame of reference.

Teacher Leadership in Successful Schools: Supporting Conditions

Successful principals of successful schools “draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices” (Leithwood, et al., 2006, p. 6). Although the practices of successful principals should not be taken as prescription, since the influence of school context coupled with human agency (Ribbins, 2001) in the exercise of leadership are critical factors in determining school success, the literature provides evidence to support that what they do has a significant, albeit mostly indirect, effect on student achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood et al., 2006; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). One important practice related to this discourse is that of successful school leaders establishing systems and incentives—supporting conditions—to ensure the sharing of leadership (Harris & Day, 2003). Ideally, the school as a professional learning community provides the right conditions for this sharing of leadership, which develops and supports teacher leaders (Muijs & Harris, 2006; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). Seashore, Anderson, and Riedel (2003) describe a professional learning community as one in which there is “the establishment of a school-wide culture that makes collaboration expected, inclusive, genuine, ongoing and focused on critically examining practice to improve student outcomes” (p. 3). A school’s culture is critically important to the functioning of schools, and involves an intricate mix of beliefs, values, meanings, and assumptions, which are manifested in an array of symbolic representations, such as ceremonies, artefacts, and relationships; and is a strong determinant of individual and group attitudes, behaviours, and actions (Barth, 2001a;

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Nias, Southworth, & Yeomans, 1989; Peterson & Deal, 1998). Undoubtedly, every school has a culture, which, using dichotomous descriptions, may be hospitable or toxic (Barth, 2001a); positive or toxic (Peterson & Deal, 1998); and healthy or unhealthy (Saphier & King, 1985). Positive, hospitable, and healthy school cultures are those associated with professional learning communities that have the supporting conditions for teacher leadership to thrive.

Muijs and Harris (2006) identify 10 factors in healthy school cultures that contribute to the emergence and maintenance of teacher leadership:

- (1) supportive culture characterized by collaboration, trust, and collegiality among staff
- (2) supportive structures, such as opportunities for continuing professional development, time to meet, and internal promotions, with clearly defined roles for lead teachers
- (3) strong guidance and support from the head teacher
- (4) commitment to action enquiry and data richness
- (5) innovative forms of professional development
- (6) coordinated improvement events, which ensure that development works are aligned to the school's vision
- (7) high levels of teacher participation and involvement
- (8) collective creativity
- (9) shared professional practice, which enhances professional learning
- (10) recognition and reward, particularly to sustain teacher leadership and teacher motivation

The findings of other researchers, such as Birky et al. (2006); Frost and Durrant (2003b); Little (2003); Mangin (2007); and Nieto (2007), support Muijs and Harris' (2006) findings. It is conditions such as these that successful principals and head teachers work to ensure exist in their schools.

In fact, Whitaker (1995) made two important discoveries from his study, which distinguish between more and less effective school principals with regards to teacher leadership. Whitaker notes that not only were more effective principals able to recognize their informal teacher leaders, but they also had the ability to use teacher leaders more effectively in the change process than principals in the less effective schools, thereby creating an enabling school condition for teacher leaders. Some effective principals, according to Birky et al. (2006), choose to directly influence the development of leadership skills and attitudes in teachers by mentoring those who are learning to lead, while

others make themselves available when needed or lead by example. This shows the varying degrees of support for teacher leadership by principals.

Mangin (2007) recognizes a link between principals' level of support and their combined knowledge of the teacher leadership role and interaction. She notes that principals with high levels of knowledge and interaction actively support teacher leaders by communicating with teachers about teacher leadership. These principals identify teacher leaders as a resource for improvement and communicate expectations for teachers' instructional improvement. They influence teachers' receptivity to teacher leaders by their words and actions, which lend credibility to the role and, so, they expect teachers to interact with the teacher leaders. In this way, many of the barriers erected by teachers themselves are torn down and the benefits of teacher leadership realized. The potential benefits of teacher leadership are now discussed.

Benefits and Impact of Teacher Leadership

Though teacher leadership is widely advocated in the literature, there is, according to Harris (2005), little evidence of its impact on school improvement. However, it is supposed that by using the transitive relationship—teacher leadership encourages collaboration, which results in professional learning as knowledge is shared, which translates into improvement in professional practice, which in turn reflects in students improved achievement—the impact becomes evident (Frost & Durrant, 2003b; Smylie, Conley, & Marks, 2002). Frost and Durrant (2002), using a handy framework, identified the following impacts:

- on classroom practice—changes included such things as using “more adventurous teaching styles” and new materials and technology
- on colleagues' practice—teachers reported thinking differently about their teaching—an important step to school improvement—and were sharing “best practices”
- on personal practice—the impact was evident in teachers' increase in knowledge about classroom practice and school-wide processes, which enhanced teachers' professional identity

Collegiality, social capital, and trust are increased as staff work together, while the school's culture changes to being “learning enriched” (Rosenholtz, 1989) as its capacity for more and better development work increases. It is this aspect of teacher leadership that has the most potential to effect school improvement (Muijs & Harris, 2006). Teacher

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leaders also reflected on the impact of their leadership beyond the school, reporting that networking became a reality and parental involvement in student learning increased. Students are also impacted as their dispositions towards learning improve.

Teacher leaders in studies conducted by Harris and Muijs (2005); Muijs and Harris (2006); and Birky et al. (2006) reported being empowered and motivated. Their performance and level of job satisfaction had improved. Teachers were more committed, evidenced by lower levels of absenteeism and higher levels of teacher retention. Positive impacts on teachers' morale, self-efficacy, and agency were also evident (Frost & Durrant, 2003).

Senior management also benefited, as a larger bank of knowledge and ideas is created when teachers are involved in school development (Muijs & Harris, 2006). A spin-off effect is that teachers buy into change more easily as they feel a sense of ownership, having participated. There is also support for the principal who needs assistance to accomplish his/her increasing responsibilities (Camburn, Rowan, & Taylor, 2003, cited in Muijs & Harris, 2006). As schools function as learning communities where teacher leadership thrives, Frost and Durrant (2003b) notice other benefits—everyone has a voice and the freedom to reach their potential, and students become prepared for a democratic way of life.

Common knowledge suggests that not all schools benefit from teacher leadership in the ways identified here. Arguably, where the supporting conditions for teacher leadership are absent, toxic, or unhealthy, school cultures prevail. Such cultures likely entertain the erection of barriers to teacher leadership; however, this is not to suggest that healthy cultures are free from barriers or that toxic ones have no supporting conditions. More realistically, one can conceptualize schools existing along a continuum where the two opposite school cultures—healthy and unhealthy—are polarized, with barriers to teacher leadership existing to varying degrees. It is to these barriers that attention is now turned.

Barriers to Teacher Leadership

Barriers to teacher leadership can be intrinsic to the teacher leader or context-specific. One internal obstacle is the tension created from taking on expanded responsibilities, resulting in concerns over work-life balance (Little, 2003; Reid et al., 2004). With respect to school conditions, the barriers may be many more. Aguirre (2002, cited in Little, 2003) identified the tension teachers may experience between professional autonomy and collective obligation, which may determine

the extent of collaboration and support that might be offered to teacher leaders or development work. Moreover, where teachers are apathetic, unwilling, or lack the confidence and experience to take on leadership responsibilities or support that of others, an unsupportive culture is created, which hinders the development of teacher leadership (Muijs & Harris, 2006). Also constituting a barrier to the development and maintenance of teacher leadership is a devaluing of the work and efforts of teacher leaders (Birky et al., 2006), as well as a lack of principal support, particularly where the head either refuses to relinquish control or demonstrates a passive form of support by not communicating adequately with teacher leaders or waiting for teachers to assert developmental work (Muijs & Harris, 2006). Other barriers to teacher leadership noted by Muijs and Harris (2006) include external accountability pressures, which may make the sharing of leadership more difficult and risky, especially in underperforming schools, and lack of internal coherency, which results in staff moving in different directions because the school's vision is not shared. Frost and Durrant (2002, 2003b) and Little (2003) also identify the latter.

Danielson (2007) recognizes yet another barrier to the emergence, development, and maintenance of teacher leadership in what she describes as the "tall poppy syndrome," an Australian expression meaning "those who stick their heads up risk being cut down to size" (p. 19). The tall poppy is the teacher leader who may be humiliated by other teachers. Fullan (1991) and Lieberman et al. (2000) also note this alienation of the teacher leader whose recognition, whether real or perceived, may aggravate some teachers. According to Anderson (2004), aggrieved teachers may see the teacher leader as the principal's pet and teacher leadership as having the potential to create hierarchies amongst teachers in terms of closeness to the principal, which can result in some teachers having no influence in decisions made in relation to the school. Fullan (1991) calls this a disruption in the egalitarian culture among teachers, which is punishable by alienation (Johnson & Donaldson, 2007; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Pugh & Zhao, 2003). A similar type of segregation among teachers was noted by Leithwood and Jantzi (1997, cited in Anderson, 2004), who argued that in some schools, formal leadership roles were actually used to exclude potential sources of teacher leadership, forming another barrier to the emergence and development of teacher leadership. Where such barriers exist, especially in proliferation, the benefits of teacher leadership may not be realized or sustained.

This overview of the conception of teacher leadership has looked at definitions of teacher leadership and has addressed questions as to who

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teacher leaders might be, looking at their qualities, roles, and responsibilities. The conditions, benefits, and barriers to the emergence, development, and maintenance of teacher leadership have also been discussed in this overview. An explanation of the approach used to analyse teacher leadership at one primary school in Trinidad and Tobago, using the overview of teacher leadership, follows.

Approach

As this analysis is not done on data from a formal research study, the *approach*, rather than *methodology*, used to draw attention to the possible existence of teacher leadership in the Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) school context is gleaned from the author's reflection on being a teacher at Savannah Primary. Some would argue that it is a rather unconventional approach. Notwithstanding, this approach, which gauges those reflections of teacher leadership using existing conceptions of the phenomenon, produces valuable knowledge on the practice, potential benefits, support, and barriers of teacher leadership in that school, which may provide the impetus for future research into the phenomenon within the T&T context.

In order to assess the practice of teacher leadership at Savannah Primary, four teacher-leadership episodes, featuring teacher leaders for whom pseudonyms have been used, are presented and discussed. In selecting the word *episode*, I wish to show that not only are the accounts related, but that they together form part of a larger narrative that is the life of the school. The literature on teacher leadership, largely drawn from the UK and US where the concept is more widely known, was used to analyse the school's response to this type of leadership sharing. The supports and barriers to teacher leadership at the school are then presented as driving and restraining forces in a force field chart, which provides a graphic summary of the analysis. A brief description of Savannah Primary is now presented.

Savannah Primary: A Brief Description

Savannah Primary, a pseudonym for a co-educational, government primary school in Trinidad, serves a socially and economically disadvantaged community. It has a history of high staff turnover, but within the last few years has managed to retain a stable staff. Savannah Primary has had three principals and two acting principals over its 15 years of existence. Apart from the vice-principal, there are 22 teachers on

staff, including two heads of departments. The student population, which has been dropping steadily, is 438 students presently.

Savannah Primary is renowned for its outstanding performances at cultural and sporting events. However, though it has seen some academic improvement, it remains under “academic watch,” as approximately 75% of students writing the national tests either nearly meet the standards or fall well below them.

At Savannah Primary, lead teachers take on a variety of roles and responsibilities, which include:

- meeting with colleagues to examine the reasons for pupil underperformance
- analysing test data
- designing and running an after-school programme for parents to help them assist their children with reading
- mentoring teacher trainees
- representing the school in a visionary exercise to improve schooling in the district
- creating the school’s development plan
- participating in decision making
- assisting in performance evaluation of teachers

Some of these bear resemblance to the work of teacher leaders in the USA, UK, and elsewhere. As mentioned earlier, four episodes of the work of teacher leaders at Savannah Primary have been analysed to appreciate what teacher leadership looks like in this school, and to identify the conditions that support and/or hinder its emergence, development, and maintenance. The presentation and discussion of these episodes follow.

Teacher Leadership at Savannah Primary: Conditions That Facilitate and/or Hinder Its Emergence and Maintenance

For analysis, four episodes from the school are presented and discussed.

Episode 1: The Reading Programme

The Reading programme was developed by a group of three teachers, each having between 10 and 15 years of teaching experience, including experience in reading remediation. They had volunteered to address the literacy problem at the school. After long hours spent, sometimes at lunch time and after school, researching for and designing the programme, the teachers had a final product that they shared with the staff. As the Reading programme was well received, the teachers soon got working on creating a Reading room. Many books, furniture, audio/visual equipment, and reading remediation software were sourced through donations, fundraising ventures, and the use of some school funds. The room was beautiful!

However, when it came to implementing the programme, problems arose—timetabling clashes, unwillingness on the part of senior teachers to allow their students to participate in the programme, and the two teachers who were asked to expand their classes to take the students of the “new reading remediation teacher” refused. Eventually, the implementation of the programme was discontinued and the room was left unused. The developers of the programme vowed never to get so involved again.

From the scenario in Episode 1, it appears that there was some principal support (Muijs & Harris, 2006), to the extent that teachers were allowed to innovate and resources were made available to them for this purpose. Some aspects of a supportive culture (Muijs & Harris, 2006) existed, such as the “intellectual sharing, collaborative planning and collegial work” (Johnson, 1990, p. 148) amongst the programme designers, which undoubtedly provided them with a sense of satisfaction (Johnson, 1990). Unfortunately, it was short-lived as colleagues did not appear to be supportive. The culture of teaching at the school (Johnson & Donaldson, 2007) seemed to undermine the teachers’ efforts, resulting in enthusiasm giving way to disappointment as teachers relinquished their leadership responsibilities. Little (2003) reports on teacher leaders even leaving their posts, schools, or teaching altogether after such disappointments.

There is also a “tension between professional autonomy and collective obligation,” as described by Aguirre (2002, cited in Little, 2003). Teachers, particularly senior teachers, prefer to “protect their autonomy” and “reinforce their seniority” (Johnson & Donaldson, 2007, pp. 10–11) rather than go along with everyone in accepting advice about

teaching from teacher leaders, whom they consider too young or inexperienced to function in such a capacity (Johnson & Donaldson, 2007).

There is also evidence in this episode of, according to Muijs and Harris (2006), a lack of structural support for the full institutionalization of this development work in the form of timetable clashes and, it seems, unclear communication about how the work was to affect other teachers. This, and the principal not doing more to have the programme running, may suggest her adoption of a “passive approach to teacher leadership” (Muijs & Harris, 2006, p. 971), where the principal in this episode didn’t communicate adequately with teachers or encourage the full implementation of the programme, thereby forming a barrier to teacher leadership. The barriers here also point to a lack of internal coherency, where the school’s vision seems not to be shared, and school members appear to value or prioritize school goals, such as improved literacy among students, in different ways.

Strong guidance and support from the principal was evident in Episode 2. Having recognized a need, the principal, acting as instructional leader, sought to improve the situation and did so by encouraging the professional development of the infant teachers. According to Muijs and Harris (2006), it is usually the head who initiates teacher leadership by actively encouraging teachers to take on leadership roles as seen in Episode 2. Frost and Durrant (2002, 2003b) make the same observation, adding that principals have the power and influence to provide both internal and external support in order to create the right conditions for the emergence and sustenance of teacher leadership, as is also seen in Episode 2. Birky et al. (2006) and Little (2003) corroborate this.

Episode 2 mentions the recognition of the work of one teacher by the principal. Birky et al. (2006); Frost and Durrant (2002a); Mangin (2007); and Muijs and Harris (2006) all attest to the strong motivating force that such recognition has in sustaining teacher leadership. However, some teacher leaders, upon receiving recognition or reward for their work, are faced with alienation from other teachers (Fullan, 1991; Lieberman et al., 2000) as punishment for upsetting the egalitarian culture among teachers (Johnson & Donaldson, 2007; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Pugh & Zhao, 2003) as observed in Episode 2. While this may dishearten some teachers, others, as reported in Frost and Durrant’s (2002) study, have found that without affirmation of their work, impact of the development work on the school is limited.

Episode 2: A Master Teacher Shares Her Knowledge

Mrs. Green, a teacher for more than 30 years, was recognized for her expertise in the teaching of reading and comprehension skills. She was particularly creative at producing resources that both pupils and teachers could use in these subject areas. As the acting principal, she was very much interested in what went on in classrooms and offered her assistance where needed. One day, she made the observation that the infant department seemed too regimented. She lamented that she heard no rhymes and singing coming from those rooms, which she noticed were not arranged or decorated in ways that were inviting to young children.

Concerned, she decided to informally and non-obtrusively (or so she thought) give ideas to improve the learning experience of both Year 1 and 2 infants. The result was that four out of the five infant teachers took her advice and had begun to see real improvements in their teaching and in student outcomes. In fact, one practising teacher for 7 years, Ms. Romany, was now doing so well that she was being innovative herself, and Mrs. Green decided to show her room as a “model infant classroom” to staff. This teacher became quite unpopular with other teachers in the department.

Unfortunately, Episode 2 also notes the unpopular position in which the teacher leader was placed, reflecting the possible existence of the “tall poppy syndrome” (Danielson, 2007, p. 19), as teachers felt the need to “cut down the tall poppy.” Anderson (2004) reasons that such a situation has the potential to create hierarchies amongst teachers based on closeness to the principal. One district in the 1980s, as reported by Little (2003), sought to rid itself of such a problem by eliminating the formal post of Head of Department. How effective the move was is not discussed.

One identifiable, supporting condition for teacher leadership from Episode 3 is a “commitment to data richness” (Muijs & Harris, 2006, p. 967), which is used to inform teaching and learning. However, Muijs and Harris (2006) only make mention of collecting data. Surely, data richness also involves processing, analysing, and reporting on or representing that data in a more useful manner. However, as observed in Episode 1 about the Reading programme, the school—teachers and pupils—did not benefit from the development work of the teacher leaders. It is quite possible that this development work, which saw the involvement of school stakeholders in the creation of a shared vision, acknowledgement

and identification of its strengths and weaknesses, and the devising of an action plan towards improvement, would have begun to reap the benefits of teacher leadership for the school. Evidence of the development of a healthy culture was evident in the collaboration and the attempts at promoting internal coherence through the development plan; however, the creation of this plan seemed to be an end in itself rather than a means to school improvement.

Episode 3: School Development Planning

As part of its accountability to the Ministry of Education, Savannah Primary had to submit a comprehensive school development plan. The head of the Data Committee at the school, Ms. David, a teacher for 12 years, was at the time, with her team, analysing three years' national test data and two years Secondary Entrance Assessment (SEA) examination results, when she was asked if she would lead the creation of the development plan. She willingly accepted, though the deadline clashed with other important school events.

The plan had to include a school profile, SWOT analysis, strategies for improvement, and an action plan. Ms. David got busy, creating questionnaires for teachers, parents, students, and ancillary staff. These were administered and her team analysed the findings and gave regular reports to staff. Meetings were held with teachers and parents to create a vision for the school and possible strategies for dealing with the challenges that were identified.

The project lasted four months during which Ms. David worked long hours, sacrificing parts of her personal life. However, at the end of it all, a nicely bound development plan was sent to the Ministry of Education and a copy was placed in the principal's office as evidence of a completed project.

One issue implicit in this episode is the teacher leader's struggle to satisfy the measures and deadline set by the Ministry of Education while juggling the demands of the school and her personal life. Teacher leaders in the studies of Little (2003) and Reid et al. (2004) had similar concerns, and also complained of being overworked and unable to find a work-life balance.

Episode 3 also tries to highlight what a great support Ms. David is to the principal. Johnson and Donaldson (2007) recognize that while this may be beneficial to the principal, and because teacher leaders' roles are

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seldom well defined, many teacher leaders end up spending much of their time as assistants in administration, rather than, they say, using their expertise to improve teaching and learning. Little (2003) defines this simply as a division of managerial labour. While this is quite possible, the relationship between the principal and teacher leader has been looked at from a different perspective—not one of administrator and personal assistant, but one in which there is “leadership reciprocity,” as proffered by Anderson (2004). Yet, this idea too has its limitations. Leadership reciprocity projects a mental picture of leadership influence being passed back and forth, like a ball, between principal and teacher leader. It is worthwhile to consider that when one has the ball, the other does not; also the one with the ball is free to do with it as he/she likes. What will the other be doing then? Again, consider what can happen if one of the two should drop the ball? Is leadership reciprocity a true conception of the relationship between principal and teacher leader? Investigations into the nature of this relationship may provide better understanding, and may even assist in identifying ways to improve those that are lacking.

Episode 4 draws attention to professional development at Savannah Primary. The provision of continuing professional development as a necessary condition for the empowerment of teachers and improvement of professional practice cannot be emphasized sufficiently. Muijs and Harris (2006) recognize that innovative forms of professional development are necessary for the emergence and maintenance of teacher leadership. In their study, teacher leaders worked together to find ways to upgrade their professional development activities. According to Episode 4, teachers tried two ways to do just that. The first, using the strengths of teachers at the school to develop other teachers in a form of internal professional development, though well intentioned, was prematurely aborted. Teachers appeared unwilling to conduct or participate in sessions, citing a number of reasons, which though not invalid in themselves, remain only excuses so as not to dive into the labour-intensive, intellectually-challenging work of improving teaching and learning.

The second strategy of inviting external help appeared to work. The school was benefiting. However, two or three sessions in one academic year can hardly make a significant impact, especially since deciding on the topic for professional development day is done in a similar fashion as the proverbial pulling numbers from a hat. This again points to the crucial issue surrounding teacher leadership development at the school—the lack of internal coherence of development work (Frost & Durrant, 2003b; Muijs & Harris, 2006). The school’s academic performance is so low that teachers are not sure where to begin and so they try this and try

that in search of solutions, with little attempt to align the work to the school's vision or prioritize. Teddlie and Reynolds (2000) maintain that coordinated improvement efforts are important for school effectiveness. It is also possible that teachers at Savannah Primary may lack confidence in taking on the teacher leadership responsibility of running professional development sessions, preferring that external personnel to the school be charged with this responsibility.

Episode 4: In-House Professional Development

As part of the move to improve student achievement, teachers agreed that there was need for continuing professional development. Ms. David, who was the head of the Data Committee, had voluntarily designed a needs analysis sheet and passed it around to all the teachers to identify their areas of strengths and those needing development as related to classroom teaching. Every teacher filled in the form. Ms. David liaised with the principal and teachers to categorize and match the areas of development with the teachers who identified them as strengths. It was decided that teachers would have a working lunch one day in each week, where some aspect of teaching would be addressed.

Only one session happened before the idea crashed. The reasons included the demands of teaching; preparation for tests; no support structures put in place, e.g., supervision of students at lunch time; and some teachers felt that they should have a choice in which sessions they attended.

However, the mandatory staff development day sessions, which occur once a term, were successful—teachers spoke of which strategies they were using in their classrooms from the sessions. The first was on team building and was conducted by a facilitator from a private agency. The second was on Creative Writing teaching and was conducted by teachers from another school.

An overview of the analysis of teacher leadership at Savannah Primary, which brings together the main issues, follows.

**Analysis of Teacher Leadership at Savannah Primary:
Overview**

Determining the cogency of teacher leadership at Savannah Primary is not a simple exercise. The author recognizes, too, that this analysis has

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its limitations, as it is based on reflection rather than on an investigative study of the school; and so is subject to gaps in memory, some situational misinterpretations, and ignorance of certain facts. However, this analysis can serve as motivation for such a study in the future.

Though there are a number of supporting conditions, the emergence and sustenance of teacher leadership at the school are restrained by unrelenting barriers. There is need, then, to consider the strength of the effects of both supporting and debilitating conditions on teacher leadership at the school. Such a consideration is undertaken in Figure 1 using a technique proposed by Kurt Lewin in 1947 known as a force field analysis. Note that the supporting conditions are the driving forces, while barriers or issues surrounding teacher leadership are the restraining forces.

Supporting Conditions and Barriers to Teacher Leadership

From the episodes discussed, a number of supporting conditions for teacher leadership at Savannah Primary can be identified, although they exist at varying strengths (see Figure 1). Its strongest driving forces are principal support, collective creativity, and teacher involvement. However, while these are important to teacher leadership development, other conditions appear to have a rather debilitating effect on the potential outcomes of teacher leadership at the school. These include the weak supportive culture and structures at the school, and a very weak commitment to innovative professional development. It is likely that the prevailing effect of teacher autonomy and the alienation that comes with the tall poppy syndrome serve as counterforces to a more supportive culture of teacher leadership. It seems also that principals, while being supportive of teacher leaders, are not very effective at influencing teachers' receptivity of teacher leaders, which is needed for teacher leadership to thrive, according to Mangin (2007). It appears from Figure 1 that the overall effect of the supporting conditions may be slightly stronger than that of the restraining forces. This may mean that an 'emergent' form of teacher leadership, according to Harris and Muijs (2005), exists at Savannah Primary. There is the presence of key conditions for teacher leadership to thrive, which may account for the improvement in the retention rate at the school within the last few years; but the principal and teachers are still learning to share leadership.

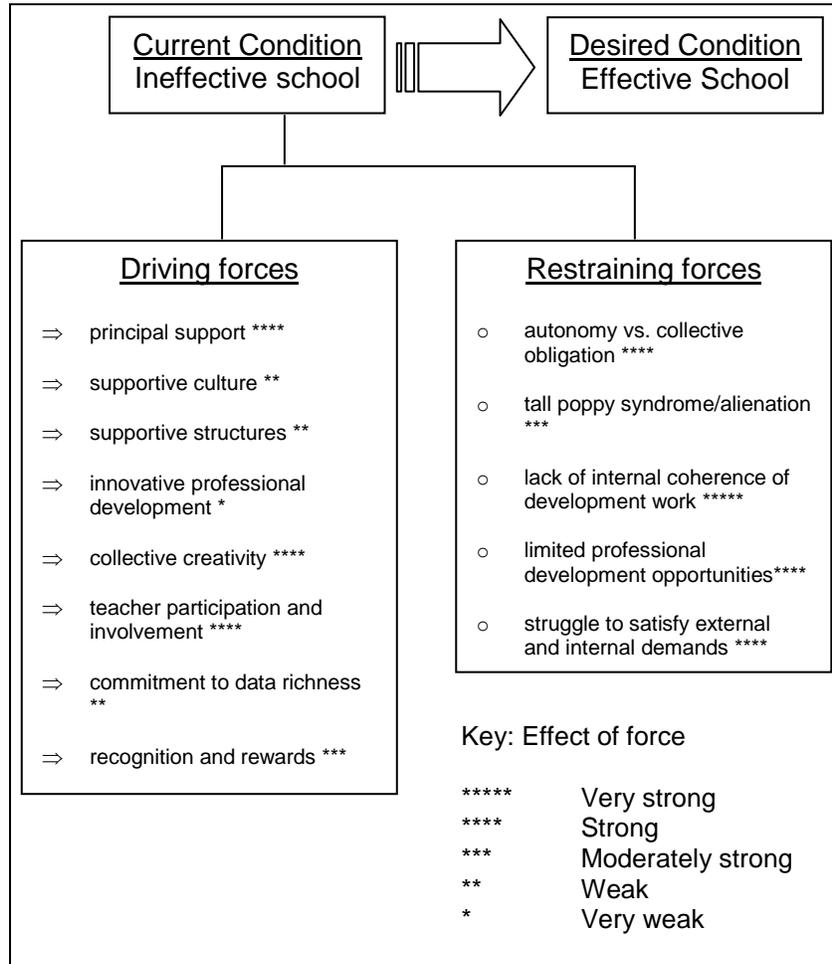


Figure 1. Force field analysis of teacher leadership at Savannah Primary.

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Teacher Leaders at Savannah Primary

Another aspect of this analysis focuses on the teacher leaders themselves. The developers of the reading programme each had 10-15 years of teaching experience and expertise in reading remediation. Ms. David had been a teacher for 12 years and was versed in data processing and analysis, being the delegated head of the school's Data Committee; while Ms. Romany, the infant classroom designer, had been a teacher for 7 years. All these teacher leaders operated in informal capacities towards developing some aspect of the school by volunteering, taking on delegated tasks, or "emerging spontaneously" as Ms. Romany (Danielson, 2007, p. 16). In terms of their qualities, evident from their acceptance of responsibility for the development of the school, they all appeared to be optimistic about teaching and learning and school improvement; they were all talented and proficient in their subject content and were likely respected for their knowledge, at least by their principals and those that worked closely with them.

Interestingly, these teacher leaders at Savannah Primary are mainly teachers in the second stage of their teaching careers—4-10 years (Johnson & Donaldson, 2007), which coincides with professional life phases 4-7 years and 8-15 years conceived by Day & Gu (2007). Johnson and Donaldson (2007) have recognized that these teachers often find opportunities to lead attractive, as many of them want to share the expertise they have acquired. Day and Gu (2007, pp. 435–436) see a similar trend in teachers developing their professional identity, but they also capture that group of teachers, like Ms. David, who are trying to define their work-life balance. It is this committed, passionate action of teachers, which, as Frost and Durrant (2003b) remind us, leads to real, sustainable school improvement. However, at Savannah Primary, there seems to be little or no assessment or appreciation of the time, effort, and work of teacher leaders that is wasted. This disregard can possibly lower teacher leaders' commitment and morale, as was evident in Episode 1, the Reading programme.

Impact of Teacher Leadership

Until the present time, the school has seen only small signs of improvement, which often are not sustained. The main reason may be because, according to Muijs and Harris (2006), teachers are moving in different directions, introducing strategies and initiatives that lack internal coherence—one of its significant barriers. Sammons, Hillman, and Mortimore (1995) refer to this as not having a high level of consistency in practice or coherence in values. Frost and Durrant (2003b,

p. 175), in agreement, explain that the “deeper shared understanding” that comes from “critical discourse among colleagues” is lacking, thereby creating few opportunities for the “examination and clarification of the values” to which the school should adhere. In other words, the school’s culture seems to tolerate contrived collaboration (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996) rather than encourage true collaboration about teaching and learning, based on trust. The school needs to be ‘recultured’ (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). It is, consequently, the principal’s responsibility to ensure coherence among the various development works, as well as their alignment to the school’s vision and set priorities (Frost & Durrant, 2002, 2003b). Naturally, this is no easy feat, especially since principals’ support at Savannah Primary varies with each new principal; but it is still a worthwhile pursuit that will enhance the school’s effectiveness.

At Savannah Primary, there also seems to be a lack of continuity of beneficial development work because of teachers’ tendency to capitulate to “business as usual.” Should Savannah Primary gather and use evidence of the impact of its development work to transform the planning of future development work, according to Frost and Durrant (2003b), then realization would come that a colossal amount of time and energy is being wasted, and work that has the potential to improve pedagogy and student achievement is being neglected.

Unfortunately, in Trinidad and Tobago, there is little the school can do about unwilling, unsupportive teachers, besides helping them to see the benefits of teacher leadership, and even less can be done about external accountability measures. There are, consequently, two significant barriers to teacher leadership at Savannah Primary to “overcome”: limited professional development opportunities and the internal incoherence of development work. Savannah Primary will also need to strengthen the supporting conditions that exist at the school, in order to reach its goal of becoming an effective or successful school.

Conclusion

In this paper, a teacher leader is considered as one who, whether formally or informally, works collegially while leading the improvement of professional practice and student learning in ways that are duly aligned to the school’s vision. The paper has presented an overview of teacher leaders and their leadership, and has analysed its presence (or lack thereof) at one underperforming primary school in Trinidad and Tobago. The lack of consensus about what exactly is teacher leadership has made its legitimacy within the leadership field difficult to pursue (Harris,

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2003b) and any meta-analyses hard to make (Harris, 2005). Though a number of benefits, such as increased teacher motivation, have been cited, the practice of teacher leadership is likely underexplored, even in countries where the concept is well known. However, where teacher leadership does exist, the extent to which it thrives, as seen in the analysis in this paper, is dependent on school conditions such as its culture, principal support, commitment to continuing professional development, and internal coherence of development work through vision creation and alignment. Also noted is the responsibility of the principal in ensuring these conditions at the school. This analysis showed Savannah Primary to have an emergent form of teacher leadership, where some supporting conditions, such as principal support, were present alongside counterforces or barriers that did not allow for its benefits to be fully realized. An interesting and important area for research would be an investigation of what intervention or mediation strategies are used by principals, and even teacher leaders, towards demolishing barriers to teacher leadership. An equally informative area of research would investigate the exercise of teacher leadership in successful schools, particularly in Trinidad and Tobago, so that best practices would be gleaned.

In addition, based on this analysis, there may be need to re-examine and reconceptualize teachers' professional preparation and development to include not only the development of leadership skills, as suggested by Reid et al. (2004), but also "opportunities for systematic [and collaborative] reflection on their teaching practices, beliefs, values and contexts" (Day, 1998, p. 268). Surprisingly, the literature is somewhat deficient on research of teacher leaders' development. In the absence of such programmes, the responsibility to develop teacher leaders belongs to principals—a responsibility dutifully fulfilled by successful school leaders. Rather than leaving this to chance, according to Mangin (2007), principal preparation programmes that provide information about the purpose of teacher leadership and on the principals' relationship to the role would likely improve the situation at schools. Nonetheless, the reality is that potential teacher leaders are in schools everywhere; although they may be invisible or under-appreciated. It is the remit of principals and other school leaders to become aware of the untapped leadership potential that lies within teachers, and to develop and use these for the benefit of their schools and students.

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