

Teacher Leadership: A Lever for Shaping School Capacity

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Rationale for the Study

The demands on schools have increasingly become more complex in the context of accountability. School reform is on the agenda in many countries throughout the world (Barber & Mourshed, 2007, Fullan, 2008) with the belief that improvement can only be achieved if the entire school and system take responsibility for student learning and collaborative teacher learning. School reforms have not had a long history of success as there tends to be the problem of “initiativitis” according to Fullan (2008). The symptoms of initiativitis are the unrelenting launch of disconnected programs and initiatives. Add to this the lack of involvement of teachers in the proposed changes and you have a recipe for failure. Stoll and Fink (1996) believe “that these attempts have failed in the past and will fail in the future because teachers have not been involved in the changes and find little personal meaning in them (p. 6).” To correct this pattern, Elmore (2004) suggests that “improvement is more a function of *learning to do the right things* in the settings where you work than it is of what you know when you start to do the work (p. 73).”

Elmore goes on to say that the problem lies in the fact that there is:

almost no opportunity for teachers to engage in continuous and sustained learning about their practice in the setting in which they actually work, observing and being observed by their colleagues in their own classrooms and in the classrooms of other teachers in other schools confronting similar problems of practice. (p. 127)

If teaching and learning are to be the focus of well-planned, connected reform initiatives and if teachers are to be an integral part of the changes called for, then the relationship between teacher leadership and school capacity for change is an issue that requires investigating.

Research Question or Purpose

The purpose of this research was twofold. Firstly, to define the concept of teacher leader as it applies to both the formal and non-formal roles within a school. Along with this, the research project was designed to investigate the impact elementary school teacher leaders have within a school as they engage in a change initiative. The following research question guided data collection and analysis:

1. How do teacher leaders impact a school's capacity for change?

The concept of teacher leadership (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Lambert 1998) vis-a-vis the three dimensions of school capacity as defined by King, Newmann, & Youngs (2000, 2001) will form the basis of the conceptual framework used in this study. School capacity is a critical factor when looking at why some schools are able to improve instruction while others are not. School capacity includes the following three sub-constructs:

- Teachers' Knowledge, Skills, and Disposition
- Professional Community
- Program Coherence

Conceptual Framework

This research paper begins with a review of the literature on the intersection of change, teacher leadership and school capacity. The dimensions of school capacity used for this study is informed by the work of King and Newmann (2004) and include teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions, professional community, and program coherence.

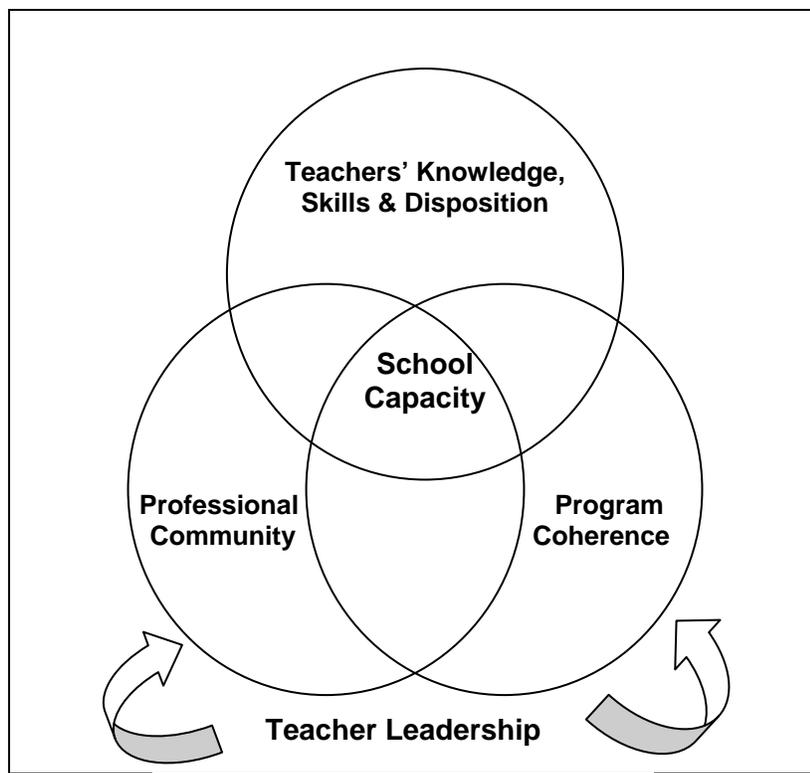


Figure 1: Relationship Among the Dimensions of School Capacity and Teacher Leadership

School Capacity:

Why are some schools able to change existing conditions within the school and improve teaching and learning while other schools continue to spin in the vortex of the activity trap? The answer exists in the understanding of capacity. Schools need to develop the capacity for improvement so they can understand how to support a new way of interacting within the school. School capacity helps to explain how organizational features of schools influence the quality of teaching and learning (King & Newmann, 2001; Elmore, 2004). The three dimensions of capacity that are being used for the focus of this research study are taken from the work of King & Newmann:

- Teachers' Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions
- Professional Community
- Program Coherence

They argue that none of these three elements can be treated in isolation from the

others. This simple model of capacity relies on the interdependence of each of the dimensions. For example, a school cannot have shared expectations for student achievement without spending time on enhancing teacher knowledge and skill of instructional and assessment practices. Nor can you have a common understanding about what students are expected to learn in each grade without engaging in professional dialogue as a community of learners. Enhancing capacity is a precursor to any type of improvement as it defines the factors necessary for improving teaching and learning.

Teachers' Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions:

Teacher knowledge and skill are at the core of school improvement (Elmore, 2004). This aspect of capacity is about developing the competencies of individuals. The evidence on the impact of instructional practice is dramatic (Leithwood et al, 2004; Barber, 2007) as the McKinsey Report clearly states that “you can’t improve student learning without improving instruction (p. 11). If learning is the work (Fullan, 2008), then a focus on the resources to ensure that all educators in the building (teachers, support staff, and administrators) have the ability to continually engage in job-embedded learning to improve their knowledge and skills is critical for improvement. The McKinsey Report (p. 28) goes on to suggest the following strategies to Improve teachers’ knowledge and skills at the school and system level :

- Building practical skills during the initial training
- Placing coaches in schools to support teachers
- Selecting and developing effective instructional leaders
- Enabling teachers to learn from each other (McKinsey Report, Barber & Mourshed, 2007)

Professional Community:

It is very difficult to read anything about educational leadership and reform in this new millennium without seeing a reference to the importance of building professional community. Professional community refers to creating the conditions and culture where administrators and teachers work and learn together with a purpose of improving their practice through an examination of data and evidence (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Fullan, 2008; Stoll & Fink, 1996). King and Newmann (2004) outline several characteristics in their definition of professional community:

- A clear, shared purpose for student learning;
- Collaboration among staff to fulfill that purpose;
- Reflective professional inquiry by the staff to address the challenges teaches face; and
- Opportunities for the staff to influence the schools' activities and policies (p. 28).

An underlying theme of professional community is the notion of collaboration and continuous improvement. Rosenholtz (1989) as quoted in Fullan (2008) and Stoll and Fink (1996) has documented the importance of professional community as she explains the difference between “stuck” and “moving” schools. Stuck schools are characterized by: “Little attachment to anything or anybody. Teachers seemed more concerned with their own identity than a sense of shared community (Fullan, p. 34)”. In contrast moving schools are “not only effective in ‘value added’ terms but people within them are also actively working together to respond to their changing context and keep developing (Stoll & Fink, p. 86)”.

One of the keys to capacity then is to create the conditions within a school that promotes teachers working and learning together in an inquiry approach to improving teaching and learning.

Program Coherence:

The last dimension of school capacity refers to the extent to which the school's programs for student and teacher learning are coordinated and focused on clear learning goals and sustained over a period of time (King and Newmann, 2004). The McKinsey Report sites unsettling research that demonstrates the adverse effects of the variation between classroom instruction within a school. They used a Tennessee research project to illustrate that "if two average eight-year old students were given two different teachers – one of them a high performer, the other a low performer – their performance diverge by more than fifty percentile points within three years (p. 12)." This is significant because when schools create shared understanding for expectations for students and teachers, they can avoid variation between classrooms. Elmore (2004) refers to program coherence as internal accountability. By this he means "that there is a high degree of alignment among individual teachers about what they do and about their responsibility for the improvement of student learning (p. 114)." The disconnect between policy and practice is one reason why so many attempts at reform fail according to Elmore. When school personnel become the decision-makers in terms of what policies and initiatives they will work on, they create a new direction for policy implementation which begins at the school and informs outside influences. Schools create program coherence when they use student learning data to make these decisions.

School capacity is the intersection between program coherence, teacher knowledge and skills, and professional community. Building capacity therefore involves a concerted effort by the leadership within a school to provide the opportunities, resources, and training needed to ensure these three dimensions are evident. Teacher leadership will be used as the connective tissue as these dimensions interact to bring about change within a school.

Change:

Our current education paradigm requires leaders to look at change using a new set of skills and beliefs. Many researchers (Stoll & Fink, 1996; Elmore, 2000; Harris, 2002; Lambert, 1998; Fullan, 2001) advocate that although not all change is improvement, all improvement involves change. Improvement, then, “is change with direction, sustained over time that moves entire systems, raising the average level of quality and performance while at the same time decreasing the variation among units, and engaging people in analysis and understanding of why some actions seem to work and others don’t (Elmore, 2000; p. 13).”

A key component that differentiates more or less successful schools is an understanding of the change process. Further to this, Stoll & Fink (1996) believes that:

Whether they are improving or declining, because schools are either getting better or they are getting worse, due to the rapid pace of change which makes standing still impossible. (p. 16)

Fullan (2001) advocates that “leading in a culture of change means creating a culture (not just a structure) of change. As well, change, according to Fullan (1992), “involves learning and.... all change involves coming to understand and to be good at something new (p. 749).” In order to do this, schools must develop the capacity to do so. Moreover, Stoll and Fink acknowledge that building the capacity for change is extremely complex, but vitally important. In successful schools, she concludes, that capacity building becomes a habit:

Successful schools not only manage change; they actively take charge of it and creatively accommodate external ideas within the school’s own context and needs. Even within an externally determined framework, the most successful schools pursue their own areas of interest. This is broader than having a sense of shared vision. The school rather than the government, ministry of education or regional office, is in the driving seat, setting its own direction, adapting mandates creatively to fit its vision, incorporating external educational reforms into its own culture. Successful schools have an ownership mentality and define their own direction, irrespective of external demands. (p. 16)

Leadership is a key ingredient in building capacity for change (Elmore, 2000; Sergiovanni, 2000; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Marzano, 2005; Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006). Ultimately, how leaders create the conditions for change and improvement and build relationships to facilitate change is critical when dealing with educational reforms.

Teacher Leadership:

The concept of school leadership is in a state of transition as many educators realize that it is very difficult for one leader to do the job all on their own. There is evidence (Stoll & Fink, 1996; Little, 2003; Harris 2003; Leithwood et al, 2003; Elmore 2004; Fullan 2008) to demonstrate that for school leadership to make a real, long lasting impact on student achievement; leadership must be distributed across the school. Distributed leadership, or teacher leadership specifically, offers an alternative way of explaining and understanding the relationship between leadership and organizational change. Teacher leadership can be shown to be a key strategy in bringing about and sustaining school improvement. The growing realization of the need to cultivate teacher leadership can be seen in recent literature. The literature however, does not rely on a single definition of the concept of teacher leadership. Instead teacher leadership is frequently link to the concept of instructional leadership and the development of others. The definition proposed by Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) define teacher leaders as: “teachers who are leaders lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders, and influence others towards improved educational practice (p. 17).” Lambert (1998) in, *Building Leadership Capacity in Schools*, captures the critical assumptions of teacher leadership:

these processes must enable participants *to learn themselves toward a shared sense of purpose* – a purpose made real by the collaboration of committed adults. Leadership has direction and momentum, and it negotiates tough passages. It is this type of leadership we are seeking to build – the capacity to collectively learn ourselves toward purposeful

action so that a school community can keep moving when current leaders leave... (p.8)

York-Barr and Duke (2004) synthesize the recent literature on teacher leadership and propose this definition:

The conceptions of teacher leadership described above highlight the use of teachers' expertise about teaching and learning to improve the culture and instruction in schools such that student learning is enhanced. Such a view of teacher leadership involves leading among colleagues with a focus on instructional practice, as well as working at the organizational level to align personnel, fiscal, and material resources to improve teaching and learning. (p. 261)

While teacher leadership does not have one singular definition, there is consensus that this form of leadership does not necessarily have to be bestowed formally on an individual. There is an organic quality in the nature of teacher leaders which speaks to the efficacy of teachers and the context of individual schools. What teacher leaders actually do may look different depending on the context and culture of the school in which they work. Recent research suggests that the tasks of teacher leaders can include coaching and mentoring of and modelling for teacher colleagues, delivering professional learning, organizing resources, and creating professional community among staff. These tasks can be seen as critical practices that influence the development of teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions; build professional community, and promote program coherence.

Context of the Study

This study incorporated interviews of four teacher leaders working in four different elementary schools in an Ontario school district. All four teachers were in the formal leadership role of literacy teacher. The district defines the role of literacy teacher in this manner:

- Believe that all students can achieve high standards given sufficient time and support;
- Know, understand and apply the Guiding Principles for Literacy Instruction;
- Promote and facilitate professional development in the area of literacy
- Coach teachers and model instructional strategies
- Model instructional strategies in the content areas;
- Work alongside staff to identify, select, and organize literacy resources in a common accessible area; and
- Support the principal/vice principal and school literacy team in planning professional development activities that promote effective literacy instruction (Guidelines for Literacy, 2007).

All the teachers interviewed in this study were allocated 0.25 of their schedule to the role of literacy teachers. The other component of their timetable ranged from classroom teacher to librarian and English as a Second Language teacher. All schools served students in junior kindergarten through to grade eight. The four literacy teachers were selected as they were considered effective leaders in their schools by their principals and each of the schools had been identified at the beginning of the school year, based on their student achievement data, as needing extra support. Three of the schools were involved in a Board initiative called the School Effectiveness project and the other school was part of another Board initiative called the Equity of Outcomes project. In all four cases, the initiatives were designed to improve teaching and learning through a focus on building capacity among the staff.

Methodology of Data Collection & Analysis

Data was collected by conducting individual interviews with four teacher leaders in their own school settings. Each teacher leader was interviewed independent of the others and consisted of a single 30 to 40 minute semi-structured interview (Merriam, 1998). The questions were designed to be open ended to enable each participant to describe their own experiences and to illicit individual interpretations of the impact they have. The researcher spoke with teachers to explore the themes of the conceptual

framework outlined earlier in this paper. Because the goal was to gather data on the relationship between teacher leaders and school capacity and the sample size was small, the participant sampling procedure was critical in the selection process. The study used the purposive selection technique (Merriam 1998). The researcher first asked key school district curriculum personnel to recommend names of effective teacher leaders. From this list, the researcher chose the four candidates that would be interviewed for the study based on the need to learn and gain insight (Merriam, p. 61) from a sample which had a lot to offer in terms of learning about the role and impact of teacher leaders. To begin, the researcher created a list of criteria for the sample. For example, the researcher wanted teacher leaders who had been engaged in the position for more than one year. Also, the researcher sought teacher leaders that were part of a school staff that were involved in a Board change initiative. The final criterion used was the willingness of the teacher leader to be involved in this research study. The researcher initially approached the school principal to ensure that the teacher leader would be able to provide the information upon which this investigation was designed.

Each interview was recorded and transcribed and since the interviews took place in the school in which the teacher leader worked, modified field notes were taken to support the data collected through the interviews. A comparative analysis of the data was used as the transcripts were reviewed in an iterative fashion until themes and patterns emerged.

Presentation of Findings

As stated earlier, the purpose of this study was to understand the role of teacher leaders and how teacher leaders impact a school's capacity for change. From the analysis of the data collected, the presentation of findings is organized around the three dimensions of capacity: teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions; professional

community, and program coherence; along with other predominant themes that emerged from the interviews.

Teachers' Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions:

The literacy teachers interviewed spoke with a great deal of enthusiasm about their role and the impact they have on the staff. When each spoke about a specific project that they were involved in during the school year, they became very animated and could clearly articulate how their role had made a difference in building the knowledge and skills of the staff.

The literacy teachers talked about their role of working with their teacher colleagues to build their knowledge and understanding of literacy and assessment. This was done through professional development workshops they developed and delivered at the school and the sharing of professional resources and student resources with colleagues. One literacy teacher talked about how teacher knowledge, skills, and dispositions were impacted through her role as peer coach and literacy partner. She spent time in teachers' classrooms modelling lessons and then having discussions with the classroom teacher about how to implement the literacy learning on (her) own. All the literacy teachers reflected on their role as disseminator of knowledge from the system-level workshops they attended. They saw it as their responsibility to share the learning from the network meetings and literacy collaborative sessions they attended on a monthly basis. This sharing of information to build teacher capacity was done at staff meetings, divisional meetings, and during informal conversations. All teachers talked about the importance of spending their allocated literacy time to collect the most up-to-date literacy resources and to ensure that their teacher colleagues were aware of how they could use them in their classrooms. One teacher said, "We have spent a lot of money on professional resources" and she was pleased that a colleague asked, "What can you give me so I can read over the summer for my professional development." This

was a real success for the literacy teacher.

Professional Community

All the teachers talked about the importance of building rapport with the rest of the staff. Words such as credibility, perceptions, and trust were used by each of the interviewees. The teachers spoke about the importance of building relationships with the staff. One talked about building rapport by providing resources. With her background as the teacher librarian she was able to facilitate the purchase of books for classroom libraries. She said, “all teachers love presents and being the bearer of those presents I was put in a good light.”

The notion of professional community was expressed in slightly different terms by each of the literacy teachers. For instance, one teacher commented,

“We always had professional community but it was by division. We now have professional community but it’s school wide. We used to have our own little niches: everyone was moving together in their own little chunks, but this year we are moving forward together as a school.”

Two of the literacy teachers talked about how the establishment of an action research project created enthusiasm among the staff, built professional community, and built teacher knowledge and skills.

“The teachers involved in action research are now the next go-to people if we as literacy teachers are not here. We are slowly reaching out as we go. We are very conscious of the fact that if we want this to go, then we have to incorporate more leaders in our school.”

Another respondent commented on how action research was used to share leadership and bring resistors on board with the school’s initiatives.

[The principal] put some of the resistors on the action research team. To see where the conversation and dialogue went with those people was great. The days when we met at school were unbelievable. I had already had lots of opportunity for professional development so I could see where things aligned, but sitting back and watching them figure it out was one of the most incredible things because some of them had these ‘a-ha’ moments and seeing where they were coming on a professional level was amazing and then to have them present it to the staff was awesome.

Having a common project to work on with colleagues also provided the vehicle to promote professional community. As one teacher put it, “we are all socially open, but instructionally closed in this school. Having our TLT project allowed five teachers to work together with a shared vision.” To enable this to happen, the literacy teacher credited the additional allocation of release time during the instructional day which provided the time for the collaborative approach.

Program Coherence

The challenge of closing the variation between classroom instructional practice is one that schools need to deal with if they are going to close the achievement gap for all students. As an aspect of school capacity, program coherence is difficult to measure through the lens of the literacy teacher because of the difficulty with union issues of not being able to compare practice of colleagues. Keeping this mind however, all of the literacy teachers were able to reflect on what they have done to improve the coherence of programming between grades and divisions. One teacher leader talked about how the entire school was using common language to describe a balanced literacy program. This was achieved through professional dialogue with colleagues in mixed teams of teachers from kindergarten to grade eight. Another teacher reported that teachers are now planning together with their grade partners, “You go into a classroom and the day plans look totally different than they used to because they have a common block for literacy based on a template discussed at a staff professional learning session.”

Many of the teachers talked about the notion that “we are all in this together” and having an “open door policy”. Since most of the literacy teachers interviewed are in just their first or second year in the role, they have not seen a dramatic impact on closing the variation between classrooms but they all anticipate that this feeling of cohesiveness will be woven into the fabric of their school culture.

All literacy teachers talked about the task of creating or supporting a book room of student and professional resources. In their description of this task, the elements of program coherence could be found. The willingness to provide the needed resources to teachers helped create a standard for what was expected in each classroom.

Having common expectations for student learning was also a key element in what the literacy teachers referred to as a case management approach to improving student achievement. In all schools, they had created a formal process for meeting with teachers in grade partner teams or cross-divisional teams to discuss certain students who were experiencing difficulty in the classroom. These discussions became a forum for discourse of instructional practice and creating understanding between teachers of what effective assessment and monitoring practices should look like in each classroom.

Challenges

All teachers addressed the issue of a lack of preparation for the role. One actually said she “fell into the job” because the former literacy teacher fell and this teacher was given the position because of her “long standing position on staff and her rapport with staff”. Unfortunately, this lack of selection criteria and preparation were the norm across all the schools.

Dealing with resistant staff members was a common theme expressed by the literacy teachers as well. One teacher explained how she dealt with this challenge:

We had some definite resistors. A lot of negativity on staff with changes at the beginning of the school year: new timetable, new roles for staff, restructuring of school with primary class size, new administrator, etc; so we had to pull the staff together for a common cause. Getting started was a challenge to find a focus for the school. We put the brakes on where we were headed and went back to the basics.

The challenge of time was expressed by all teacher leaders interviewed, but in different ways. Some commented on the lack of time to get into classrooms to do

modelling, or lack of time for coaching of individual colleagues. Others talked about the difficulties that the timetable created since they were only scheduled with literacy time for a quarter of their overall timetable and needed to balance this with their other teaching responsibilities. One teacher said,

“Our timetable makes it difficult to get into classrooms to model. We’ve been doing more consultation and planning with teachers. I tend to fall back to collaborative role. I need to spend more time coaching my colleagues. I’m more conscious of it now, and I’m working on developing my coaching skills.”

Discussion

The findings from this study align with the concepts of school capacity and support the Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) research on teacher leadership which suggests:

These teachers, who exhibit competence in their classrooms, take risks to work with and influence their colleagues. As they encounter problems, teacher leaders begin to see the complexity of their work, then work together to find solutions. Our definition of teacher leadership implies that teachers have an obligation to participate together as learners and leaders. In learning communities, teacher leaders share practices, mutually problem-solve, and reflect on and learn from their experiences. (p. 46)

The teachers interviewed for this study demonstrate these dimensions of teacher leadership and it is through these dimensions that school capacity for change is impacted.

One of the contributions of this study is that it suggests that each literacy teacher works in very different contexts yet are able to influence the teachers they work with in similar ways. Keeping the dimensions of the conceptual framework as the organizer for the data, we can generalize to some extent, the tasks that literacy teachers undertake that leads to building school capacity. Further research is needed to help refine our conceptual understanding of each of the dimensions of school capacity so we can identify the needed preparation of teacher leaders and deal with the challenges they

face in their schools.

The reoccurring theme of collaboration is an interesting concept to pursue in future research as it seemed to be the basis for much of the work of the teacher leaders. Understanding how to create the conditions for collaboration and sharing leadership in the context of job-embedded learning would add to the ability to learn from this current research project.

Reflection

This experience has been very worthwhile for my own learning as a novice researcher. I found that it was essential to have a thorough understanding of the concepts I wished to explore before embarking on the interviews. This conceptual understanding allowed me to structure my interview questions in a way that tapped into the expertise and insights of my respondents. I was also able to asking probing questions when the answers were brief or inconclusive.

The conceptual framework was far more difficult to develop than I had anticipated. Trying to create a visual that would guide my thinking and provide the boundaries for the research was new learning for me, but once it was in place, the research was able to flow naturally from it. Linking this to the review of the literature was an essential aspect of this process and proved to be time well spent when it came to writing the final research report. Having the conceptual framework actually provided me with the sub-constructs needed for a full discussion of the phenomenon under investigation.

Interviewing the subjects was a great experience. I thoroughly enjoyed meeting with each of the respondents in their own school setting and engaging them in a conversation. The enthusiasm for their role and the commitment they have to working with teachers to improve teaching and learning for all students in their schools were

evident in all of the interviews. At first I was apprehensive about asking for such a large chunk of time at such an incredibly busy time of the school year, but I did not have anyone turn me down in my requests for interviews. In fact, I had two other literacy teachers volunteer to be part of my study if I needed others.

The most challenging aspect of the research study I would say was the transcribing of the interview tapes. Each interview lasted anywhere from 35 to 45 minutes. Using computer software to slow down their voices was helpful, but the task was daunting and required many, many hours of work. Although this part of the study was difficult, it was also very fruitful. I learned a lot about my interview style and techniques and was able to improve my questioning and listening skills with each interview as I attempted to transcribe each interview before I conducted the next one. This process also allowed me to extract the themes from the interviews rather easily and begin the presentation of findings phase in a systematic way.

The process of conducting qualitative research is certainly one fraught with many challenges, but also provides a richness of data that can only be obtained through personal accounts and reflections.

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Appendix A

Research Question

Primary Research Question: How does teacher leadership shape school capacity for change?

Within this research question, there are three sub-questions that provide more specific responses that relate to the conceptual framework used. These three questions are:

1. What leadership practices are teachers engaged in?
2. What elements of school capacity for change are affected by these leadership practices?
3. How do these leadership practices affect school capacity?

Interview Questions

Dimensions of School Capacity:

- Teacher knowledge, skills, and dispositions
- Professional community
- Program Coherence

1. How long have you been in the role of literacy teacher in your school?
2. As a teacher leader, what are some of the things you do to support your teacher colleagues?
3. What are some of the successes you have experienced as a teacher leader?
4. What are some of the challenges you have had as a teacher leader in this school?
5. What activities do you do to shape teachers' knowledge, skills, or dispositions?
6. What have you done to facilitate the building and/or sustaining of professional community in this school?

7. How has leading staff in professional learning reduced the variation in classroom practice?
8. Do you do in-class modelling with your peers? If so, what has been the impact on your colleagues?
9. Have you participated in the coaching training? Has it impacted your practice and/or your colleagues' practice?
10. Are you part of a literacy teacher network? If so, has it had an impact on your practice with your colleagues?