

CLASSROOM TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP IN
THE CLASSROOM,
SCHOOL, AND EDUCATIONAL
COMMUNITY

By

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There was a time in American education when teacher leadership was imperative and not optional (Merideth, 2007). That time involved teachers writing and assessing policies, seeking out their own professional development, and teaching each individual student regardless of grade level or aptitude. The setting was the one-room school house and the time pre-dates multi-building school systems containing the massive administrative hierarchies of the twenty-first century. The present system relies on outside sources such as elected officials, for-profit companies, and a handful of administrators in a main office to dictate the policies for teachers to follow. Often these people or others in state or federal offices mandate the content for teachers to teach. This bureaucratic system and hierarchical school structure keeps teachers, who are on the front line and who have the knowledge, skills and dispositions required to improve student learning, from being leaders in their classrooms, the schools, and their educational communities (Ash & Persall, 2000; Harris, 2003).

This study identified the subjective opinions that teachers have about leadership in their classroom, in the school, and in the educational community. It also identifies their ideal perceptions of leadership in the classroom, in the school, and in the educational community. The study describes relationships between how teachers perceive leadership and specific demographic information. The demographic information includes their gender, age, ethnicity, years of experience, grade level, subject area, degrees held and certifications.

School leadership must respond to the needs of our ever changing, information filled society by embracing new forms of leadership, especially teacher leadership (Frost & Durrant, 2003). Formative leadership spreads the responsibility of leading to multiple individual educators in an anti-hierarchical or horizontal manner. Gonzales (2004) suggests democratizing education by redefining teacher leadership as shared leadership for all teachers. "Teacher leaders can transform schools into communities that prepare students for citizenship and work in a complex, technological, and democratic society" (Lieberman & Miller, 2004, p.12). Silins and Mulford's (2002) research illustrates the strong relationship between higher student outcomes and leadership distributed throughout the school community involving teacher empowerment in areas teachers considered as their strengths.

Teachers must participate in leadership in order to advance the progress of school change (Ash & Persall, 2000; Lieberman, 1999; McCay, et al., 2001). Recent data highlight teachers choosing to remain in schools that offer teachers collaboration and leadership opportunities (Harris & Muijs, 2005). This research suggested shared leadership opportunities as a way to recruit and retain teachers. Kilcher (1992) noted that when teachers felt valued as participants in a cohesive community and were empowered as true decision makers, they passed this empowerment on to their students by giving them a voice in decision making and by including them when planning and designing student instruction.

The purpose of this study was to identify the subjective perceptions teachers have of leadership in the classroom, school and educational community and their ideal perceptions of leadership in the classroom, school and educational community. The study

identified patterns of beliefs teachers hold about leadership by using Q-methodology, a research method crafted by William Stephenson (1953) and further developed by Steven Brown (1980). Q-methodology gives the researcher an organized technique to uncover qualitative data within the participants’ opinions, as well as, a way to quantify this data using factor analysis procedures. Q-sort statements aligned with the leadership model developed by Ash and Persall (2000), known as formative leadership theory, were utilized to identify the teachers’ perceptions. The study described relationships between how teachers perceive leadership and their gender, age, ethnicity, years of experience, grade level, subject area, degrees held, certifications and opportunities for leadership. The demographic page also asked about specific leadership roles.

Research questions to be investigated for the present study are:

1. What perceptions do teachers have about their own leadership in the classroom, in the school, and in the educational community?
2. In what way do these perceptions relate to their ideal leadership self?
3. What demographic patterns might assist in understanding teacher’s varying perceptions of leadership?

Teachers’ opinions and perspectives are the core of this study and cannot be predetermined in any manner. “Only subjective opinions are at issue in Q, and although they are typically improvable, they can nevertheless be shown to have structure and form, and it is the task of Q-technique to make this form manifest for purposes of observation and study” (Brown, 1996, p. 58). In a presentation at the 9th Annual Meeting of the International Society for the Scientific Study of Subjectivity, Thomas and Bass (1993) noted, that subjectivity is self-referent in nature; therefore, processes used to measure subjectivity should maintain the person’s point of view and not ignore it.

In Q methodology, the participants are the center of attention, not the data the researcher is collecting. Factors evolve from the participants’ individual subjectivities (Brown, 1993). There are usually two to four factors in a set. Individuals will cluster together as factors according to their agreement with certain values or opinions (Smith, 2001). The researcher would ideally like to have four or five people represent each point of view or define a factor, though the number of people is not important (Van Exel, 2005).

Demographic Information

Female	30	Male	5
Caucasian	27	Native American	7
African American	1	Asian American	0
Hispanic	1	Other	0

Average number of years teaching 12

Early Childhood	6	Elementary	9
Special Education	4	Spanish	1
Physical Education	1	Secondary	6
Alternative Certification	1		
Bachelor Degree	26	Masters Degree	9
Never Attempted National Board Certification			19
National Board Candidate			8
Reattempting National Board			1
National Board Certified Teacher			7
Average % of job involved in school leadership			33%

Factor One Classroom Oriented Teacher Leaders

Most Like Statements

1. Individual performance expectations for students dominate my work in my classes.
14. My leadership style in the classroom requires student initiative and control.
15. Students are innovative thinkers because of my curriculum.
11. I determine the amount of homework my students can accomplish.
6. Valued added activities and assessments are used in my class.

Most Not Like Statements

36. After attending a workshop, I share the information with my colleagues through a workshop or professional development meeting.
20. I am influential in shielding teachers from unwarranted outside influences that might interfere with teaching and learning.
21. I have a voice concerning hiring new teachers and/or administrators.
39. I conduct action research and share my results with

educators, parents and administrators.

35. I work with a higher education institution to improve the teacher preparation system.

Factor One teachers were different from the other teachers in that they demonstrated most of their leadership within the classroom which assisted in labeling them *Classroom Oriented Teachers*. Most of these teachers were not connected with National Board Certification, nationwide only 2% of teachers have achieved this certification (NBPTS, 2007). The average percentage of time involving leadership for everyone in Factor One was 28%. Of the twelve teachers, only one held a Masters Degree. One of these teachers is Nationally Certified and three are attempting to become certified. This equates to less than one third of these teachers seeking National Certification which is well above the national average.

Factor Two Community-Minded Teacher Leaders

Most Like Statements

38. I invite parents and other people in the local community to be a vital part to a healthy school.
35. I work with a higher education institution to improve the teacher preparation system.
9. My students celebrate each others' accomplishments on a daily basis.
41. I am part of several networks to enhance my knowledge and effectively communicate with other educators.
29. We spend a lot of time talking about teaching and learning in our meetings and in our spare time.

Most Not Like Statements

27. There is a great deal of trust among the teachers and the administration in our school.
20. I am influential in shielding teachers from unwarranted outside influences that might interfere with teaching and learning.

- 12. I am in charge of my classroom and choose the teaching techniques used regardless of outside input.
- 16. I often arbitrate disagreements between colleagues.

- 21. I have a voice concerning hiring new teachers and/or administrators.

Collaborative Teachers agreed with *Classroom Teachers* that openness and communication are evident each day within their classrooms. This is one of the two statements most like them. The other statement most like them helps to define the label *Collaborative Teachers* because it states that they choose to invite parents and other people in the local community to be a vital part of their school. Unlike *Classroom Oriented* and *Collegial Teachers*, they work with higher education institutions and communicate with other educators to improve communication concerning teaching and learning. They value sharing information and connecting with others to achieve positive results for everyone.

Factor Three Collegial Teacher Leaders

Most Like Statements

- 27. There is a great deal of trust among the teachers and the administration in our school.

- 10. I am aware of the vision and mission of our school and it is apparent in my classroom and my teaching.

- 19. Our principal comes and goes often and freely in the school, there is quite a bit of contact with the teachers and the students.

- 30. I work with the principal to serve according to the needs of all teachers.

- 26. My principal is a leader who guides us in a democratic manner.

Most Not Like Statements

- 45. Listening and learning from educators outside of my district is extremely important to me.

- 41. I am part of several networks to enhance my knowledge and effectively communicate with other

educators.

3. I ask students to evaluate me formally throughout the year to help improve my practice.

16. I often arbitrate disagreements between colleagues.

35. I work with a higher education institution to improve the teacher preparation system

Of the teachers who loaded on the factor known as *Collegial Teachers*, all twelve were female. The majority of these teachers are not involved with National Board Certification. The average percentage of time involving leadership for everyone in this factor was 43%, much higher than those of *Classroom Teachers* or *Collaborative Teachers*. Teachers who loaded on *Collegial Teachers* claimed there is a great deal of trust among the teachers and the administration in their school which is dramatically different from the other teachers loading on other factors. *Collegial Teachers* were also aware of the vision and mission of their school and made it apparent in their classroom and their teaching unlike *Classroom Teachers* and *Collaborative Teachers*. These teachers feel comfortable with their principal and accepting of administration coming and going within the school. *Collegial Teachers* believe they can make a difference and they share information with others. They feel their principal is a leader who guides them and they work with administration to help meet the needs of all of the teachers. This reflects the concept of the principal being a leader of leaders or as the Chief Learning Officer or CLO according to Ash and Persall (2000).

More than half of the teachers, eighteen in all have different views for their actual leadership and their ideal leadership. This is likely to cause disequilibrium within in ones' comfort level within the teaching profession. One teacher who was confounded on both sorts stated, "I wouldn't say my needs are fulfilled." The cause may be a lack of administrative support or a lack of incentive, either intrinsic or extrinsic, to achieve ones' ideal leadership self.

The study identified three patterns of ideas this group of teachers hold about leadership using Q-methodology and cannot be replicated using other forms of data collection such as surveys or other empirical tools. This study reveals that different teachers appear to have three general concepts concerning teacher leadership activities and they fall distinctly into the categories of the classroom, the school, and the educational community. Teachers indicated a strong preference to one of three concepts of leadership and did not seem to be aversive to the concept of teacher leadership, but in fact supportive of it. The three ways that teachers identified their actual life and ideal opportunity for leadership were as *Classroom Oriented Teachers*, *Collaborative Teachers*, and *Collegial Teachers*.

Teachers engage in teacher leadership in different ways and their structured ideas could affect their future actions in the area of leadership. These actions will affect society

far beyond the environments of the classroom, school, and educational community. These teachers are on the front lines with our children on a daily basis and their actions and perceptions directly impact children's development emotionally and cognitively. The findings of this study will assist teachers and others in the educational community in understanding the perceptions and ideas teachers have concerning their actual leadership and their ideal concepts of teacher leadership. Each teacher was a leader in a certain area.

- The largest number of teachers identified with leading within their classroom
- *Classroom Oriented Teachers* participated in the smallest amount leadership activities
- *Collaborative Teachers* welcome the community into their school
- *Collegial Teachers Leadership* is viewed as an ideal leadership
- Two-thirds of the teachers do not want to change their actual leadership

Research on concepts and perceptions has consistently shown that behaviors and attitudes can be changed with communication and education (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). The statement "Openness and communication are evident each day within my classroom" was the most positively marked, agreed upon statement from the teachers in all three factors. This commitment to openness and communication should entice teachers into conversations with other teachers and with other stakeholders involved in educational advancement. Conversations concerning teacher leadership are necessary in order for teaching professionals to continue to develop and evolve eventually leading to greater teacher satisfaction and improved student learning. These teachers welcome "...opportunities that enable the faculty and staff to become leaders capable of anticipating and leading productive change" (Ash & Persall, 2000, p. 2).

Understanding teachers' perceptions of their leadership will eventually lead to higher teacher satisfaction and higher retention rates. The need for teachers to step up and take the leadership roles necessary to make improvements within the teaching profession to enhance teacher satisfaction and improve student learning is evident. Ash and Persall (2000) see the need for teachers to be leaders and for principals to be leaders of leaders. The teachers identifying with *Collegial Teachers* aligned with their recommendations of teachers leading and allowing principals to assist them in leading. Several teachers aligned with the other two factors saw *Collegial Teachers* as the ideal form of teacher leadership. Working more collaboratively and communicating effectively appear to be the avenues to achieve the desired goals of teacher leadership.

Teachers must participate in leadership in order to advance the progress of school change (Ash & Persall, 2000; Lieberman, et al., 2000; McCay, et al., 2001). Understanding their perceptions is critical to increasing their leadership roles. Teachers remain in schools that offer collaboration and leadership opportunities (Harris & Muijs, 2005a). This suggests that shared leadership opportunities are a way to recruit and retain teachers. Kilcher (1992) states that when teachers feel valued and are empowered as decision makers, they pass this empowerment on to their students by including them when planning and designing student instruction.

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