

Great to Influential

Teacher Leaders' Roles in Supporting Instruction



March 2016



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About the Study

This report is the second in a series from a collaboration of nine leading organizations working to advance teaching and elevate the profession. Originally proposed by the National Network of State Teachers of the Year (NNSTOY) and led by NNSTOY and the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders (GTL Center) at American Institutes for Research, the study involves the following partner organizations, many of which contributed to this second report by assisting in the development of the focus group protocol, analysis of preliminary findings, and review of the report:

- American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE)
- American Federation of Teachers (AFT)
- Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP)
- Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)
- GTL Center
- National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS)
- National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ)
- National Education Association (NEA)
- NNSTOY

Introduction

We know teachers matter to student success. For years, education leaders have sought to pinpoint how teachers become effective in order to better leverage teachers' impact on student learning and improve student outcomes. Our first study, "From Good to Great: Exemplary Teachers Share Perspectives on Increasing Teacher Effectiveness Across the Career Continuum," was the first of its kind to ask National and State Teachers of the Year (STOYs) what helped them become effective. In the report, STOYs rated teacher leadership repeatedly as one of their most significant supports and growth experiences across their careers.

Teacher leadership is receiving increased attention as a potential lever for improved instruction, recruitment and retention of effective teachers, and student outcomes. In 2011, NNSTOY released Teacher Leader Model Standards (<http://www.nnstoy.org/teacher-leader-model-standards/>), which were developed by a consortium of diverse stakeholders. In 2013, the U.S. Department of Education launched the ongoing Teach to Lead initiative (<http://teachtolead.org/>), which further elevated the prominence of teacher leadership on a national scale. Alongside this



Partner Resource Spotlight: GTL Center

For more information on the research on teacher leadership, see the GTL Policy Snapshot "Increasing Teacher Leadership."

Source: Increasing Teacher Leadership Policy Snapshot

attention, a growing body of research on teacher leadership models and its potential impact on the field suggests that teacher leaders may play a critical role in creating high-functioning schools that can create sustainable improvements in teaching and learning (Silva, Gimbert, & Nolan, 2000; Ogawa & Bossert, 1995; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001; Wells, Maxfield, Klocko, & Feun, 2010). However, there is limited research on effective teachers' perspectives on how teacher leadership actually has affected their teaching practice. In this report, we offer insights from teacher leaders themselves on this topic, exploring the specific ways in which teacher leaders can contribute to instructional improvement.

This report includes three main sections: the characteristics of teacher leaders, the roles teacher leaders take in improving teacher practice, and the supports and barriers to teacher leadership. The report concludes with specific policy recommendations for supporting teacher leadership in state and local contexts.

(For more information on the first report or the From Good to Great study series, go to <http://www.gtlcenter.org/products-resources/good-great-study-teacher-perspectives-factors-influencing-effectiveness>.)



Partner Resource Spotlight: NEA

The NEA, NBPTS, and the Center for Teaching Quality launched the Teacher Leadership Initiative to support teacher leadership development across the country. About 700 teachers to date have participated.

Source: Teacher Leadership Initiative

The Findings in Brief

Characteristics of Teacher Leaders



Teacher leaders have and model a growth mindset that promotes continuous improvement and innovation.

Teacher Leaders' Roles Across the Career Continuum



Teacher leaders promote collaboration and self-reflection through roles such as mentoring, which can build more intentional and effective teaching practices.



Teacher leaders connect research and practice as adjunct professors, guest lecturers, cooperating teachers, and mentors.



Teacher leaders help beginning teachers translate effective practices to their own teaching style through modeling. Likewise, formal recognition may make teacher leaders more willing to model practices for others.



Teacher leaders may feel more comfortable taking instructional risks and promote a culture of continuous improvement.

Supports and Barriers to Teacher Leadership



Distributed leadership structures and supportive school leaders can help facilitate teacher leadership roles and grow teacher leaders.

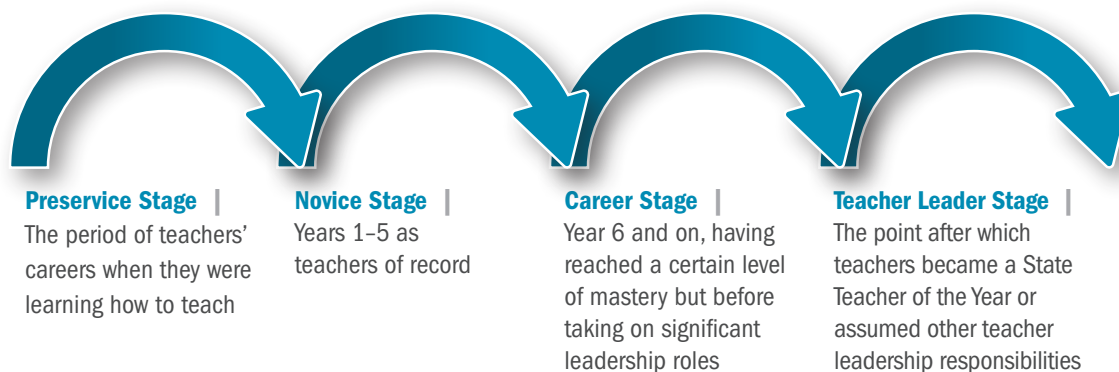


Formal and informal teacher leadership roles can both support teacher leadership.

Methodology

In our first report, our survey findings sought to describe the experiences and supports across the career continuum that led STOYs to become effective. The term “effective” was loosely defined in the first report: all respondents had been recognized publicly for demonstrating exemplary teaching practices through the STOY program. In addition, the survey items allowed STOYs to interpret the term “effective” in their own way. The four stages of the career continuum we used to organize the study were based on the Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1985) model and are as follows:

Figure 1. The Continuum of Professional Practice Development



This first report had many salient findings about what teachers may need to become effective over time. One of the more surprising findings, however, was the role teacher leaders seemed to play across the career continuum. At the preservice and novice stages, we found that STOYs considered work with teacher leaders, such as professors with recent K-12 teaching experience and mentors, to be important for developing their own effectiveness. At the career and teacher-leader stages, we found STOYs overwhelmingly rated teacher leader experiences as very important for developing their effectiveness. These findings build on a body of existing research that shows that as educators improve their practice as teacher leaders, they often improve their leadership skills, organizational practices, and instructional practices (Aladjem, Meredith, & Arcaira, 2014; Taylor, Yates, Meyer, & Kinsella, 2011; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).



Spotlight on Main Findings in the From Good to Great Report

Preservice stage:

- High-quality preservice clinical experiences with effective cooperating teachers
- Preservice coursework in their content area

Novice stage:

- Access to mentors and supportive principals
- Appropriate placements that match their training

Career stage:

- Formal ongoing education
- Opportunities for collaboration and reflection

Teacher-leader stage:

- Opportunities for teacher leaders to help less effective teachers improve

In our second phase of this study, we held focus groups with STOYs to better understand *why* teacher leaders and teacher leadership opportunities played such an important role in developing teachers' effectiveness. We sought to answer the following two overarching research questions through these focus groups:

- What role did teacher leadership play in improving STOYs' effectiveness across the career continuum?
- What do STOYs perceive as the major supports and barriers to teacher leadership?

For more details on the focus group methodology, see the Appendix.

Definition and Characteristics of Teacher Leaders

Over the past two decades, researchers and policymakers alike have sought to clearly define teacher leadership and the specific roles teacher leaders play (Curtis, 2013; Danielson, 2007; Harris, 2005; Hart, 1994; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Murphy, 2005; Smylie, Conley, & Marks, 2002; Smylie & Denny, 1990; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). For the purposes of this report, we used the NNSTOY definition of teacher leadership and teacher leaders.



Definition and Characteristics of Teacher Leaders

The NNSTOY Definition of Teacher Leadership

Teacher leadership is “the process by which highly effective educators take on roles at the classroom, school, district, state, or national levels in order to advance the profession, improve educator effectiveness, and/or increase access to great teaching and learning for all students.”

A teacher leader is “a highly effective educator who is trained in and practices teacher leadership.”

“Teacher leaders:

- foster a collaborative culture to support educator development and student learning
- access and use research to improve practice and student learning
- promote professional learning for continuous improvement
- facilitate improvements in instruction and student learning
- promote the appropriate use of assessments and data for school and district improvement
- improve outreach and collaboration with families and community
- engage in shaping and implementing policy
- advocate for student learning and the profession”

(NNSTOY, 2015)

We asked STOYs how this definition resonated with them; overwhelmingly, STOYs agreed that the definition was accurate and comprehensive. However, STOYs also engaged in rich conversations about the characteristics of the individuals who sought out teacher leadership roles or who were successful in these roles. STOYs described how teacher leaders often are individuals who seek to be change agents both inside and outside their school context, working to improve teaching and learning on a large scale.

Within schools, STOYs described how teacher leaders influence their fellow teachers, calling their positive attitude and growth mindset “contagious.” Outside their school context, STOYs described how “the teacher leader is the person who can translate between research, practice, and policy.” It is important for teacher leaders to play this role because “there are lots of good-intentioned policymakers who



Partner Resource Spotlight: AFT

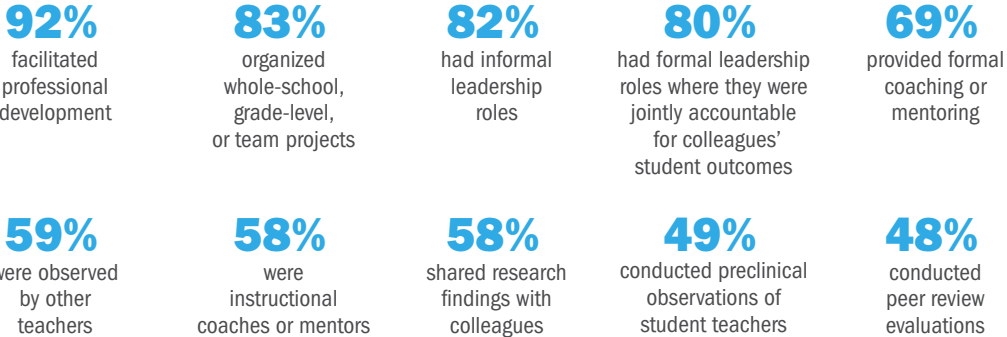
Since 2011, the AFT Teacher Leaders Program provides teachers with opportunities to engage in community leadership, curriculum, and instruction projects, such as addressing school funding issues or implementing technology-based learning. To date, more than 300 teacher leaders have made a difference in their schools, community, and profession.

Source: AFT Teacher Leaders Program

don't understand the implications of their decisions in the classroom, but equally there are as many extraordinary educators [who] don't understand the rationale for a good policy." By advocating for teaching and learning at the district, state, or national level, teacher leaders can help ensure that policy translates into effective practice and student learning. This "change agent" mindset or disposition may be important when considering the potential impact of teacher leaders and the roles they play across the career continuum.

In the first report, STOsYs reported serving in the following teacher leadership roles:

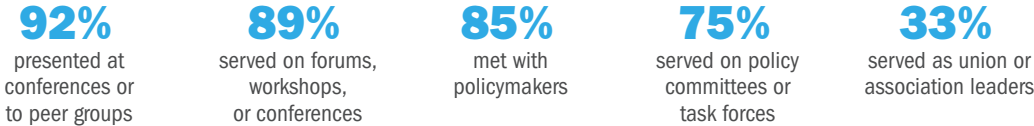
Improving Others' Practice



Improving Education in the District or Community



Engaging in Policy or Research



Personal Advancement



The Impact of Teacher Leadership

Although there has been considerable research on the roles teacher leaders play over time, nascent research exists on the direct impact of teacher leadership on student learning. In the past decades, some studies have shown a connection between distributed leadership and student learning (Silins & Mulford, 2002; Lemlech & Hertzog, 1998; Harris & Muijs, 2013). Recent case studies have described how some teacher leadership models can have a positive impact on student learning within schools (Public Impact, 2015), but a recent RAND study on the impact of teacher leadership showed mixed results on student achievement across schools and regions (Mihaly, Master, & Yoon, 2015).

Some research suggests that teacher leadership opportunities may improve engagement and reduce turnover of effective teachers (Taylor et al., 2011; Berry, Daughtrey, & Wieder, 2010; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Ovando, 1996; Jacob, Vidyarthi, & Carroll, 2012). STOYs observed that teacher leadership roles can make career advancement and professional growth opportunities visible to other teachers, especially new teachers entering the profession. One STOY said, “Young teachers are entering the profession [with] more of an activist [perspective] and those teachers are not going to be comfortable not being heard...We lose new teachers because [they] want to change things and they’re not going to be happy with a system that tells them to be quiet.” Other STOYs shared that teacher leadership should go beyond improving student learning for the teacher leader’s students to affect “the performance of other [teachers] and the performance of their students.”

Teacher Leaders’ Roles Across the Career Continuum

In focus groups, STOYs further explained how work with (or as) teacher leaders at each stage helped develop their effectiveness. Although experiences among STOYs in the focus groups varied, the following four clear themes emerged on the role of teacher leaders across the career continuum (three at all stages of the career continuum and one at the career and teacher-leader stage):

- Promoting collaboration and self-reflection at all stages
- Connecting research and practice at all stages
- Modeling at all stages
- Risk taking at the career and teacher leader stages



Collaboration and Self-Reflection



Connecting Research and Practice



Modeling of Effective Instruction



Risk Taking

Collaboration and Self-Reflection

Research has shown that collaborating, coteaching, or having purposeful conversations about practice is linked to better student achievement and teacher morale (Bouchamma, Savoie, & Basque, 2012). Opportunities to collaborate may make teachers less likely to leave the profession (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). The findings in our first report also indicate that collaboration is important, especially at the novice stage.¹ In our focus groups, STOYs explained how collaboration between preservice and novice teachers, cooperating teachers, and mentors led to a process of self-reflection, which helped them improve their practice over time.

A large body of research suggests that engaging in this process of self-reflection can help all teachers improve their practice, regardless of their previous experience or disposition (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998; Ferraro & ERIC Clearinghouse on Teaching and Teacher Education, 2000; Walkington, 2005; Larrivee, 2008). There is some evidence that a lack of time to collaborate in meaningful or sustained ways may prevent many teachers from being able to engage in this process of self-reflection: One recent study found that on average, teachers spend about 15 minutes a day collaborating with one another (Scholastic & Gates Foundation, 2012). Through teacher leadership roles, teachers may be able to engage in the kind of meaningful and sustained collaboration that can lead to self-reflection and continuous improvement.



Collaboration and Self-Reflection | Preservice and Novice Stages

In our focus groups, STOYs said effective cooperating teachers and mentors helped them grow by showing them how to plan and reflect well. Many STOYs said the most effective support their cooperating teacher provided was helping to plan lessons and units collaboratively. These cooperating teachers did more than just provide ideas and feedback on instructional approaches—they helped to refine the planning and reflection process over time.

One teacher shared:



What helped me a lot [as a student teacher was that] my cooperating teacher kept a journal on me on all of my lessons. At the time I didn't know [how] to reflect. Having a professional look at me and say, 'Okay, here's everything you're doing right [and] here's some things we need to work on,' and then looking back on her reflections helped me to be reflective on things that I didn't know I was supposed to be reflective on. Having somebody teach you how to be reflective was also helpful as well.

¹ At the novice stage, 65 percent of STOYs had time to collaborate with other teachers and 73 percent of these STOYs rated it in their top three supports. At the career stage, 90 percent of STOYs reported having time to collaborate, but only 43 percent of these STOYs rated it in their top three supports (Sherratt, Bassett, Olson, & Jacques, 2014, p. 12, 16).



Collaboration and Self-Reflection



Connecting Research and Practice



Modeling of Effective Instruction



Risk Taking

Learning how to be self-reflective may have helped these STOYs learn how to adopt a continuous improvement approach to their practice, which allowed them to continue to improve over time. STOYs also said it was important to feel that they were allowed to make mistakes as long as they learned from them. One STOY described this as the “freedom to productively struggle,” or try out different instructional approaches or styles.

Working with multiple teacher leaders also may have helped beginning teachers learn to be self-reflective. Some STOYs said they were able to work with multiple teacher leaders during preservice through district partnerships or residency models, which allowed them to see other teaching styles in practice; this in turn helped them better understand their own strengths, weaknesses, and teaching styles.



Partner Resource Spotlight: AACTE

AACTE helped support the development of the teacher performance assessment tools edTPA and the Praxis Performance Assessment for Teachers, which can help support cooperating teachers with engaging in reflective practice. AACTE’s Quality Support Initiative also provides resources to both secondary and postsecondary educators on using data for improvement and accreditation.

Sources: edTPA, Washington Teachers Who Support Teacher Candidates, Quality Support Initiative, and Praxis Performance Assessment for Teachers



Collaboration and Self-Reflection | Career and Teacher-Leader Stages

As experienced teachers, STOYs shared that when collaborating with others in roles such as a cooperating teacher, mentor, or coteacher, they were motivated to share the best and most effective elements of their practices with other teachers. This then led to a self-reflection process of identifying, refining, and improving their practice. As one STOY said, “Every time you get together...you’re revisiting why you do the things you do. It actually pushes our thinking. It pushes our practice.” Although some STOYs reported that they had these experiences when working with other experienced teachers (as part of an instructional team), many other STOYs had these experiences while serving as a cooperating teacher or a mentor for preservice or novice teachers. When working with these beginning teachers, STOYs reported that they had to be more critical and reflective to ensure they had provided beginning teachers with the tools they needed to be effective. One STOY explained:



It’s the self-reflection. You have to be constantly reflective in terms of what are you offering in support to someone else because you have their best interest at heart in any kind of mentoring position. [When] supervising a student teacher, you are always anticipating outcomes. You’re constantly problem solving, thinking ahead, and planning and being very analytical. At the end of the day, you are self-assessing. Did I give them everything they need?



Collaboration and Self-Reflection



Connecting Research and Practice



Modeling of Effective Instruction



Risk Taking

Serving in these teacher leadership roles may have helped these STOYs be more reflective than before, even as an experienced and effective teacher. In these roles, STOYs had dedicated time and a clearly defined purpose for their work with other teachers, which helped them make self-reflection a priority.

One STOY said, “When you’re in the classroom there’s no time to stop and think. You’re so involved and so focused on what your students are doing. When you work with younger teachers and you’re helping them to reflect, [you realize] that I should be doing this.”



Partner Resource Spotlight: CCSSO

In 2015, CCSSO collaborated with Jobs for the Future to create **Educator Competencies for Personalized, Learner-Centered Teaching**. These competencies emphasize how effective teachers collaborate and find opportunities to model self-reflection for colleagues and students. The guiding principles of these standards also emphasize the need for teacher collaboration to achieve these objectives.

Source: Educator Competencies



Collaboration and Self-Reflection



Connecting Research and Practice



Modeling of Effective Instruction



Risk Taking

Connecting Research and Practice

Effective teachers by definition promote student learning and achievement. By using research-based teaching practices, teachers can better connect their instructional strategies to intended student outcomes. However, many teachers face challenges in practically applying research in their everyday classroom instruction. Teacher leaders may play an important role in translating research to practice in meaningful ways.



Connecting Research and Practice | Preservice and Novice Stages

In our first report, we found that having professors with recent K–12 teaching experience may be important for developing beginning teachers’ effectiveness.² In focus groups, STOYs reported that these professors—usually adjunct faculty—helped them translate research and theory to practice more effectively than other professors without this experience. One STOY described these adjunct professors as “fantastic,” with “a whole different perspective than the people who have been in higher education for life or at least a long time.” Another STOY described how professors without recent K–12 teaching experience “did not know how to relay the [research] to us.” Instead, “the best [professors] were the ones who had teaching experience and were recently out of the classroom so they could still relate it to the kids.” Beyond simply sharing practical strategies alongside research, STOYs said these professors also were able to provide insights into how research informs policies and practices in the real world. One shared:



Research-based is important. I’m not going to deny that research is not important but I think there is the practical application of that research that sometimes the higher education folks don’t get completely right or they don’t understand all the nuances in particular districts in trying to implement the research or interpret the research as it is.

By serving as adjunct professors or guest speakers in preservice classes, teacher leaders may be able to add practical insight and nuanced perspectives on how teachers can effectively use and interpret research in their classrooms.



Connecting Research and Practice | Career and Teacher Leader Stages

As experienced teachers, STOYs reflected on how they recognized the value in research-based practices and data-driven instruction for a few reasons. For one, STOYs described their realization that it was important for them to use research in the same ways they ask students to use evidence:

² At the preservice stage, 47 percent of STOYs reported having instruction by professors with recent and relevant K–12 teaching experience, and 33 percent of these STOYs rated this in their top three most important supports (Sherratt et al., 2014, pp. 8, 10).



Collaboration and Self-Reflection



Connecting Research and Practice



Modeling of Effective Instruction



Risk Taking



I think it's important that we are using research-based ideas and putting them into practice not only for our personal or professional gain but also because that's what we are teaching our students to do. We want them to form opinions based on text, based on research, [and] based on experiences. We are trying to not only train them to do that but also be able to research and appropriate sources and analyze that research.

Turning to the research may be an important strategy for teachers to use as they refine their practice over time to ensure they are continually improving and promoting student learning. As one STOIY described:



You can start out overconfident and believe everything you read is fine, but it's not. There comes a moment in teaching when you see what's missing or you see what else is out there that other teachers are doing that is so far beyond what you've ever done. Then there's that realization of the holes or gaps in your practice. In order to make the jump to the future of change you have to ground your practice in evidence. You have to become fluent in teaching practices.

STOIYs also described how using research-based practices was important for ensuring that their instruction was effective, especially with the visibility and influence that comes with being a teacher leader. Moreover, STOIYs described the importance of using data to assess and share how their instruction impacted student learning. One STOIY said, "You can't just say it's warm and fuzzy, and it works. You have to have the data to prove it...I need to be able to prove what I'm doing works" Likewise, another STOIY noted that "the data is proving it's working. [It's important to be] able to prove these practices are good practices." This focus on using data to highlight effective practices may be especially important for teacher leaders because their practices likely will be shared and replicated by others. According to one STOIY, "Whatever that new role you're stepping into, you're immersing yourself in whatever the research is and the relevant information so that you are that expert."



Partner Resource Spotlight: National Board for Professional Teaching Standards

The National Board Teacher Leadership Competencies emphasize the importance of using research to inform both classroom instruction and understanding of policy across multiple levels of practice and in multiple ways.

Source: National Board Teacher Leadership Competencies



**Collaboration and
Self-Reflection**



**Connecting Research
and Practice**



**Modeling of
Effective Instruction**



Risk Taking

Modeling of Effective Instruction

There is general consensus in the field that early teaching experiences (during the preservice and novice stages) are important, especially interactions with other more experienced teachers. The findings in our first report expanded on this, highlighting the importance of professors with recent K–12 teaching experience, cooperating teachers who were effective at promoting student learning, and formal and informal mentors.³ In focus groups, STOYs explained that the teacher leaders in these roles were able to model effective practices, which in turn helped these teacher leaders become more effective themselves. Modeling effective teaching practices is a common component of mentoring and induction programs, but existing research has not clarified what role mentoring plays in improving beginning teachers’ practice compared to other elements of these programs (Daloz, 1986; Elliott & Calderhead, 1993; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Beginning teachers without access to mentors may have limited opportunities to see effective teaching in practice, as modeling effective practices is far less common in preservice programs (Koehler, 1985). Through exposure to teacher leadership, more beginning teachers may have opportunities to observe effective teaching and improve their practice. Likewise, teacher leader roles may allow more experienced teachers to continually improve by modeling effective practices for less experienced colleagues.



Modeling of Effective Instruction | Preservice and Novice Stages

During the preservice and novice stages, STOYs said that seeing teacher leaders model effective practices was one of their most transformative experiences. By being able to observe and practice teaching techniques, STOYs were better able to connect the research and theory they were learning to practical classroom applications. One STOY said these preservice experiences played an important role in “getting over the shock factor” as a novice teacher: “In teaching, you’re always thinking in the moment and you’re always modifying your plans. If you can’t access those tools you’re just overwhelmed all the time by the reality of teaching. So I think you need both [methods and theory].”

Beyond seeing practical applications of theory, STOYs explained how observing teacher leaders model effective teaching helped them reflect on how to translate instructional methods into their own teaching style. One STOY said, “I like seeing something and being able to say, ‘How can I replicate it? What will it look like when I do it?’” The cycle of observation and practice may be important in connecting modeling and improvement: STOYs described how the process for implementing strategies that they observed other teachers demonstrate first helped them learn how to adapt instruction to their own context and style. Likewise, STOYs noted that it was empowering to see that there was not just one “correct” way to teach. By observing, they could “look for and emulate the best in others,” but also modify effective practices to fit their preferred teaching style.

³ At the novice stage, 58 percent of STOYs had a mentor who modeled effective teaching practices, and 67 percent of these STOYs rated this in their top three most important supports (Sherratt et al, 2014, p. 15).



**Collaboration and
Self-Reflection**



**Connecting Research
and Practice**



**Modeling of
Effective Instruction**



Risk Taking



Modeling of Effective Instruction | Career and Teacher Leader Stages

Serving as a teacher leader may have helped STOYs realize that they had meaningful ideas to contribute to their colleagues and the field, which made them more willing to model best practices for others. One STOY shared that “the big shift” that changed their practice was “wanting to bring others along.” This STOY went on to say, “You feel at a certain point that you’ve had...all this great and amazing professional development that no one else in your immediate area is privy to. You start to feel almost a bit of guilt, so you start to share.” Specifically, some STOYs reported that being awarded the State Teacher of the Year distinction empowered them to share their practice with others. One STOY said, “Before I was Teacher of the Year, I would never have expressed myself...Maybe I didn’t feel that my opinions had value, but now I [do].” Likewise, STOYs also reported that they were motivated to model and share best practices because of their increased visibility after the award. One STOY noted, “I can’t... just coast in my room. I always want to do my best because everyone is looking and watching and seeing if I really am [an effective teacher].”



Collaboration and Self-Reflection



Connecting Research and Practice



Modeling of Effective Instruction



Risk Taking

Risk Taking

There is some research that suggests that like many other public-sector professionals, teachers tend to be more averse to risk than those in other occupations (Perez, 2011; Bowen et al., 2014). However, many experts also consider risk taking critical to continuous improvement and innovation in teaching (Blase & Blase, 2000; Siering, 2012; Weimer, 2014). Being recognized as a teacher leader may help teachers feel validated and confident in their effectiveness, which in turn may help them feel confident enough to take instructional risks to promote student learning. Likewise, teacher leaders may feel motivated to model how to learn and adapt when specific techniques or approaches fail. This finding was unique to the career and teacher leader stages.



Risk Taking | Career and Teacher Leaders Stages

Teacher leadership roles may provide opportunities to model how taking risks and making mistakes can lead to a continuous improvement. STOYs reported that being able to model how to learn from mistakes in these roles helped them improve as a leader as well as in their own classrooms. One STOY said, “So much of why as teacher leaders we grow when we’re coaching and mentoring and working with others is because we are consistently having to both fail forward, model vulnerability, and also really continue to learn.” By modeling how to learn from mistakes for other teachers, these STOYs were reinforcing a continuous improvement approach to their practice.

Being recognized as a teacher leader also may have given STOYs the clout or status to try new or innovative instructional approaches without fear of being deemed ineffective. Across focus groups, some STOYs described a fear of “doing something wrong”—even when their instruction improved student learning—prior to being recognized as a teacher leader or being selected as a STOY. After becoming a STOY, however, they felt confident taking risks to promote student learning and modeling continuous improvement. As one STOY described,



I’m Teacher of the Year; I’m going to go ahead and take this risk and see if it works for my kids, and then also be really open about what I’m doing well and what needs to change. I think when you can be open and honest in your question, that’s when your teaching gets better and your authentic confidence improves because your work gets better and you’re confident.

It may be important that teachers perceive that it is permissible for them to take risks to establish a culture of continuous improvement. One STOY shared that it was important to have “the power to be creative and know that if you screw up nothing’s going to happen. That is an unspoken thing in education, and I really think that pushes people to get better.” Likewise, one STOY shared the belief that taking risks can help improve student growth: “When you have that kind of environment, you feel competent...You feel comfortable enough to take risks that make you different or could break some boundaries [to learning] that have existed for so long.”

Supports and Barriers to Successful Teacher Leadership

Although there is a dearth of empirical evidence on the impact of teacher leadership, an increasing number of studies exists on the supports and barriers to successful teacher leadership models. The most common condition for promoting teacher leadership studied to date is distributed or collaborative school leadership (Hobson & Moss, 2010–11; Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, & Hann, 2002; Weiner, 2011; Birky, Shelton, & Headley, 2006; Davidson & Taylor, 1999; Pechman & King, 1993). Other studies have noted that time restraints and school organization can limit the impact of teacher leadership (Zinn, 1997; Stokes, Helms, & Maxon, 2003; Troen & Boles, 1994; Toll, 2004). Across focus groups, the supports and barriers STOYs described were similar to those described in the research literature, with the added perspective of personal experience and insights from expert teachers who have had access to more formalized teacher leadership opportunities.

School Leadership

One of the most important supports for teacher leadership STOYs described was supportive school leadership. Specifically, STOYs shared that school leaders who valued distributed leadership and shared responsibility were critical for supporting teacher leadership. One STOY stated, “When you have principals that don’t feel threatened by teachers leading...that allows for the teachers to move forward.” Another STOY shared that the most important support in their school was “shared leadership.”



It was a shared vision...We all were invested in this vision, and [the principal] valued each and every one of us. He involved us in the decision making every step of the way. It wasn’t, ‘I’m the leader and you’re the followers.’ He really respected us all. He knew what our strengths were. He played to them, and then made me want to do more.

These supportive school leaders did more than accept teacher leadership—they were proactive in ensuring that teacher leaders had the resources they needed to do their work. Likewise, these supportive school leaders were able to see teacher leaders as helpful and were willing to share their leadership responsibilities with them. One STOY suggested:



School Leadership



What we really need to do is frame this in such a way that teacher leadership is about supporting the administration. Very rarely in education do we actually talk about teachers supporting administrators. We always talk about how administrators need to support the teachers. Teacher leadership is our response to that. It's our way to help support administrators who now have to take on so much more work than they've been ever asked to support. It allows teachers to take on a little bit more of the leadership of content pedagogy and allows the administrator to take on more of the transportation services, human resources and all the rest of the things that is going on. The biggest hurdle that I see is then it truly explains that teacher leadership is not about usurping power from the administration but instead about supporting administration.

Another STOIY was able to describe how they experienced this shift with principals in their own work: "There were beliefs among the principals at first that these teachers aren't going to be able to do this, and by the time we got to the end, the principals...had given all that power over to their teachers. Not only did they give the power, but they loved the collaboration." This same STOIY, however, noted, "You don't do this in two months," arguing that this shift needed to happen through collaborative work over time, not simply through training or a change in responsibilities.

In the same vein, STOIYs perceived a lack of school leadership as a barrier to developing teacher leadership. STOIYs described principals as "the linchpin of all of our buildings," but noted that some school leaders are not sure how to best use teacher leaders or share leadership responsibilities. STOIYs described specific situations in which "a lack of trust" or a lack of teacher voice had a negative impact on their leadership capabilities. One STOIY shared that, "a lot of people have been burned because they're passionate and they care so deeply, and they present solutions and it falls on deaf ears. Then they shut down." These findings indicate that shared leadership may rely, in part, on the relationships between teacher leaders and school leaders as well as the clarity of their roles.



Partner Resource Spotlight: NNSTOY

In 2015, NNSTOY released a white paper on the policies that can support teacher leadership, including policies to promote better understanding and use of distributed leadership models.

Source: Engaged: Educators and the Policy Process



Informal and Formal Teacher Leadership Roles

Informal Teacher Leadership

When considering the roles teacher leaders take on, STOYs recognized that informal teacher leadership roles may help to promote natural leaders rather than those specifically seeking career advancement. One STOY said, “The informal teacher leadership [experiences are the most] rewarding...where I walk into somebody’s classroom and they just simply ask me for help. My principal didn’t ask me to go in there.” Another STOY noted that informal teacher leaders may be those who are best positioned to help others:



When I started teaching, the ones who [helped me] were the teachers right next door, who led me through my first few years of teaching when most people would walk away. It wasn’t administrative-appointed. It wasn’t system-appointed. It was those people who, just through their own personalities and skills, became leaders in the building. If you’re an elementary teacher, if you’re teaching reading, that’s who you want to talk to. I think that’s really part of that teacher leadership, just being able to share what you know with others and help them grow.

Likewise, STOYs expressed concern that formal teacher leader certificates or roles will prevent individuals from taking on informal leadership roles that arise from crisis or organic needs. One STOY shared:



Unfortunately...I do see people entering teacher leadership to advance themselves and their own careers, not to advance the field. That is truly disturbing to me because those of us who have been in this arena for so long and have fought so heartily for teacher leadership to see [some] teacher leaders undermine the results and the impact by focusing on themselves, it’s a dangerous and deadly thing. It will kill teacher leadership eventually if we don’t control it.

As STOYs emphasized that teacher leaders should be individuals who seek to advance the teaching profession and student learning, they also reported that earning a teacher leader certification would not be sufficient by itself to make one an effective teacher leader. One STOY reflected on the importance of demonstrating teacher leadership in practice, saying, “There’s such a rush to come up with a 180-credit degree teacher leader [endorsement]...but they missed



Partner Resource Spotlight: Learning Forward

Learning Forward hosts an online community of practice for teacher leaders to network with each other and share ideas about professional learning.

Source: Learning Forward Community

[having] opportunities to stand up and be a leader. So it might say that they're a leader, but did they actually lead throughout their career?" Likewise, another STOIY described a disconnect between teacher leadership degrees and the skills that teacher leaders need in practice:

“ [Higher education faculty] seem to think that by offering a coaching and mentoring class, that you can teach people how to coach and mentor, then that's teacher leadership. They don't address the school climate piece that you need the change theory, the leadership. They don't address any of the other stuff. They simply think that they can teach them some basic skills about the content.

These perspectives illuminate the value teacher leaders place on practical leadership experiences. Although certification may lend greater credence and visibility to the significant roles teacher leaders play, it may be important for teacher leaders to develop leadership skills in a real-world context.

Formal Teacher Leadership

While STOIYs recognized the value of informal teacher leadership, STOIYs also reported that it is important to have more formal, defined, trained, and paid teacher leadership roles. As one STOIY said, “The biggest need is that we need to have a more structured teacher leadership profession, or whatever we want to call it, because right now it's very informal.” STOIYs described many teacher leadership roles as “add-on” responsibilities and expressed a desire to see more hybrid roles combining teaching and leadership. Likewise, STOIYs described the importance of having further compensation for the additional responsibilities involved in teacher leadership roles, describing many informal teacher leadership positions as “basically getting people to do things for free.” One STOIY compared the additional compensation needed for teacher leadership to other existing hybrid roles: “We pay department chairs more money because they have taken on more leadership. You have to put it in with compensation or it's not going to be effective.”

Beyond compensation, STOIYs also reported that more formal teacher leadership roles should include dedicated collaboration time. Across focus groups, STOIYs shared that they had limited time to prepare and collaborate with other teachers, yet considered this time to be one of the most important ways to sustain teacher leadership. One STOIY shared that collaborative time can “help build that collegiality and build that time for reflection...it definitely makes a difference.”



Partner Resource Spotlight: CAEP

The CAEP Standards for Advanced Programs are designed for programs at the postbaccalaureate level, including teacher leadership programs, to ensure educator preparation providers impart the knowledge and skills to support the development of all students.

Source: CAEP Standards for Advanced Programs



Partner Resource Spotlight: National Council on Teacher Quality

In 2014, NCTQ studied teacher compensation structures across the country, including those associated with teacher leadership roles. The results are available in the brief “Smart Money: What teachers make, how long it takes and what it buys them.”

Source: Smart Money: What teachers make, how long it takes and what it buys them

Classroom Teaching Responsibilities

Despite the numerous studies and position papers published on defining teacher leadership, there is still debate over whether teacher leaders must, by definition, continue to serve as classroom teachers in some capacity. This debate may be influenced in part by the role of collective bargaining and the absence of a career ladder in the general teaching profession. In a few focus groups, STOYs expressed the belief that once a teacher takes on leadership responsibilities and no longer serves as the teacher of record for a group of students, they are by definition an administrator. A few STOYs across focus groups described the difference between administrators and teacher leaders as one of perspective: One STOY described administrators as those who “shoot for that data, that number that will please the person in the office,” as opposed to teacher leaders, who are those that lead professional development. Another STOY said, “To be a teacher leader to me means that you’re still an active educator. As soon as you step out of that classroom, to me, there’s a clock that starts ticking. If you’re out of the classroom for too long, you just don’t see it through the same lens.”

In response to this debate, STOYs emphasized the importance of hybrid roles that would allow teachers to serve in leadership roles (such as an instructional coach or data analyst) while still serving as the teacher of record for a group of students. One STOY described a hybrid role as “a teacher who’s

actually working with kids on a regular basis but then working outside of that role as well, whether it’s supporting kids in a different way or supporting teachers in a different way.” Another STOY

recognized, however, that

teachers’ motivations for choosing to take on hybrid or administrative roles may be complex: “I see people looking for a way to get out...I think our profession struggles to keep its prestige and its authenticity as that you can still be a leader and still in your classroom.”



Partner Resource Spotlight: Public Impact (GTL Center)

Public Impact, one of the partner organizations that runs the GTL Center with AIR and CCSSO, has developed the Opportunity Culture initiative to create roles with greater instructional responsibility, for more pay, within current budgets.

Source: Opportunity Culture

Policy Considerations

The insights shared by STOfs in this study have important implications for policymakers around strengthening the teacher workforce. Many of the following policy recommendations echo those of other leading organizations and, in some cases, are being adopted by states and districts seeking to improve their human capital management systems or school climate. This report may help to better explain *why* these policies are important. Because these policy recommendations build on the perspectives of excellent educators, classroom teachers may be more likely to support these efforts.

Consideration 1: Promote Hybrid Teacher Leader Roles

Hybrid roles allow teacher leaders to remain in the classroom while taking on leadership responsibilities. Teacher leaders in these roles might teach fewer sections of a course or use a shared instruction model to reduce their time in the classroom, allowing them to spend part of the day in a leadership role. These roles often include additional compensation and can allow teachers who have served in more informal leadership roles to advance to more formal teacher leadership positions. Hybrid roles also may have the potential to improve the recruitment and retention of effective teachers by providing career advancement opportunities still connected to the classroom. District and school leaders may benefit from specific guidance on how to fund and design hybrid roles within their existing budget and school structure, as well as models of various hybrid roles serving various purposes.

Consideration 2: Provide Guidance and Models for Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership models can help ensure that principals' responsibilities are appropriate and manageable. In these models, teacher leaders take on many of a principal's instructional leadership responsibilities, which also can help ensure that all teachers receive targeted and practical feedback on their performance. Principals may benefit from clear guidance or models of what distributed leadership can look like at the school level. Specifically, it may be helpful for principals to learn how other school leaders have identified, trained, and supported teacher leaders in taking on some of their responsibilities. It also may be helpful for principals to access specific examples of how these principals have reorganized their school staffing structures and schedules to optimize their use of teacher leaders. This guidance may be most effective when shared as part of a larger initiative to model and improve school climate and culture.

Consideration 3: Increase and Improve Preservice and Novice Teachers' Exposure to Teacher Leaders

Working with teacher leaders can improve beginning teachers' instructional practice, better prepare them for the ever-changing dynamics of the classroom, and help make career advancement in teaching more visible. Likewise, teacher leaders can model the attitudes and dispositions that can help lead to instructional effectiveness, such as wanting to be a “change agent.” Preservice programs can increase the number of teacher leaders serving as adjunct professors or guest speakers. Likewise, preservice programs and local education agencies can promote student teaching experiences that allow student teachers to work with a number of teacher leaders over time to develop and refine their practice.

Next Steps

As in our first report, this second phase of the study builds on the existing body of research to elucidate the conditions, factors, and attributes of effective teachers and teacher leaders. However, by limiting our survey and focus group participants to National and State Teachers of the Year, this study may represent experiences and perspectives specific to this population of teachers. Exploring these same questions and topics with a broader group of teacher leaders or effective teachers may help to better explain how to best support and develop teachers across the career continuum.

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Focus Group Protocol

The focus group protocol was designed to be flexible, allowing STOYs to reflect on their experiences with teacher leadership throughout their careers. The protocol included the following five main questions:

- What teacher leadership experience stands out in your career as the single most rewarding experience, and why?
- How do the NNSTOY definitions of a teacher leader and teacher leadership resonate with you given your experiences?
- Did you have a teacher leadership experience that enhanced your instructional practice? What was the role and how did it help you become a stronger teacher?
- Did you have access to teacher leaders during the preservice or novice stage? If so, how did they help you improve your instructional practice?
- What are the greatest challenges to teacher leadership? What are the greatest supports for teacher leadership?

The full protocol is available online at http://www.gtlcenter.org/sites/default/files/Great_to_Influential_FocusGroup.pdf.

Data Collection and Analysis

GTL Center staff conducted all focus groups, with NNSTOY teacher researchers coconducting in seven of the nine focus groups. All focus groups were recorded with permission from participants and all transcripts were professionally transcribed. GTL Center researchers led the analysis of all focus group findings using NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis software, with support from NNSTOY and other partner organizations in the analysis and organization of findings. The analysis included both interrater reliability and quality assurance processes throughout. To ensure the confidentiality of participants, all responses are attributed generally to STOYs and no names or other identifying information are included in this report.



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