Exploring Cross-Cultural Perspectives of Teacher Leadership Among the Members of an International Teacher Leadership Research Team: A Phenomenographic Study

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Introduction

This paper reports preliminary findings of a study investigating the culturally diverse understandings, experiences and perspectives of teacher leadership among the membership of an International Study of Teacher Leadership (ISTL) research team comprised of 20 academics working in universities in Australia, Canada, Latin America, South Africa, Tanzania, the United Kingdom, China and Europe. The impetus for this study emerged as a direct result of discussions at a 2018 conference in which ISTL team members expressed interest in exploring perspectives of teacher leadership among the team to inform their ongoing collaborative ISTL research. In this paper, the researchers present the rationale for the study, an overview of the methodology and some preliminary findings.

The literature on educational leadership and teacher leadership suggests that both teachers' and researchers' understandings of these concepts are widely varied (Webber, 2018). Viewed through a sociocultural lens, leadership is a culturally mediated endeavour (Hallinger & Walker, 2011; Hallinger, 2011; Rogoff, 2003), with individual views about educational success [and leadership] shaped by personal sociocultural and linguistic experiences" (Yosso 2005 as cited in Ylimaki et al, 2017, p 75). Thus, educational leaders' understandings and practices of leadership develop from the cultural traditions of their local communities, and notions of what constitutes effective leadership are context specific and subject to cultural bias (AHRC, 2018; Okoko, 2018; Rogoff, 2003; van Emmerick, Euema & Wendt, 2008).

Much of the literature on teacher leadership is said to be based on a normative conception of educational leadership and has been found to offer interpretations, conceptual frameworks, and recommendations reliant on a knowledge base in which Western notions of leadership are embedded as if they were culturally transferable (Hallinger & Walker, 2011; Webber, 2018). Hallinger (2011, pp. 299, 310) further argues that, when compared to their "sister discipline" of business management, "Education scholars have been much slower to embrace international or cross-cultural perspectives in their research", thereby failing to address a "'blind spot' in the conceptual lenses employed…" in the empirical study of educational leadership". As educators, educational leaders and educational researchers, how, then, do we embed more culturally inclusive and diverse conceptions of educational leadership in our work?

Exploring how researchers from culturally and geographically diverse communities view educational leadership is seen as a useful starting point. The purpose of the study is therefore to capture, map and share the diversity of perspectives among the ISTL research community by seeking answers to these two research questions:

1. What are the qualitatively different ways that members of the International Study of Teacher Leadership (ISTL) research team experience 'teacher leadership'?

2. How might we draw on insights gained from this study to inform our work as a research team?

As such, this study seeks insights to inform understandings of teacher leadership among researchers, policy-makers and the broader education community, with a particular emphasis on interrogating Western notions of teacher leadership.

Method

Phenomenography, a qualitative research approach focused on capturing the differences and variations in how people experience a particular phenomenon (Larrson & Holmstrom, 2007; Marton & Booth, 1997), is used by the researchers to explore the ways that the members of the ISTL research team, as the study's participants, relate with the phenomenon of interest, 'teacher leadership'. Purposive sampling of the full membership of the ISTL research team was aimed for in order to maximize heterogeneity (in this case, cultural and other diversity) of the sample. After obtaining university ethics clearance, all 20 members of the research team were invited to participate in the study. At the time of this presentation to the EARDA conference, six of the 20 members of the ISTL research team, representing six of the ten countries of origin, were participants in the study, with more expected to participate after the conference.

Mind mapping and semi-structured online interviews (Arden, 2016) using Zoom videoconferencing technology are used to gather data from participants. Thus, visual artefacts in the form of simple mind maps (Buzan & Buzan, 2005) of teacher leadership generated by respondents prior to the interviews serve as stimulus material for the interviews, allowing respondents to talk freely about their own conceptions and experiences of teacher leadership, minimising the interviewers' influence on the interviewees' thinking and thereby helping to maximise the trustworthiness of the data gathered (Arden, 2016; Collier-Reed, Ingerman & Berglund, 2009). The interview protocol was piloted by the principal researcher with a colleague prior to being used for the study. Both co-researchers conduct interviews together using mind maps as a point of departure; participants "talk through" (describe and explain) their mind maps of teacher leadership whilst interviewers annotate mind maps, take notes and ask probe questions to interrogate referential and structural aspects of participants' awareness of teacher leadership (see Figure 1).
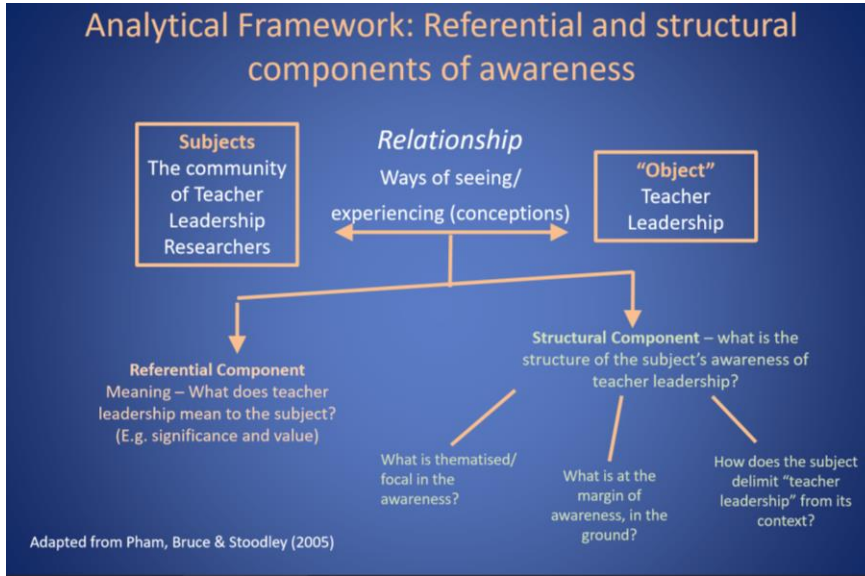
Figure 1: Conceptual and analytical framework for the phenomenographic study

A phenomenographic data analysis procedure is then followed to elicit conceptions and experiences reflected in the data, identifying and highlighting the critical variations therein. The conceptual framework guiding the analysis process is presented in Figure 1. The data analysis process occurs in three phases:

Phase 1: Discovering ways of experiencing teacher leadership in the interview data (focus on individuals)

Researchers conduct collaborative analysis and interpretation of mind maps and interview data – first individually, followed by a discussion via zoom – using a phenomenographic data analysis template (Arden, 2016). Analysis and interpretation of data is iterative and cumulative (the first interview, added analyses from subsequent interviews. Interview artefacts (zoom recordings; mind maps; researcher's notes) are inspected to identify discrete conceptions or ways of experiencing teacher leadership reflected in the data, with the focus initially on referential (meaning) components.

Phase 2: From "pools of meaning" to a "stabilised system of meanings"

This phase involves sorting data extracts from interviews (utterances, meaning units) into "pools of meaning" (Marton, 1988, p. 198), moving backwards and forwards between individual interviews and collective meaning units. Researchers engage interpretive awareness throughout, questioning their interpretations at each step of the process, to maximize trustworthiness of their interpretations (Sin, 2010). Significantly different 'ways of experiencing' (conceptions) of teacher leadership are clustered into categories of description to form a "stabilised system of meanings" (Marton & Booth, 1997) supported by selected extracts from the data (quotations and/or constructed images). The researchers start to identify "dimensions of variation" that help to characterise and differentiate the ways of experiencing teacher leadership (that is, the dimensions that run as threads across the ways of experiencing in each category) (Pang, 2003).

Phase 3: Constructing the outcome space

The final phase of data analysis involves finalizing and labelling of categories, validating ways of experiencing in each category against individual interviews and deciding on key supporting quotes for each category. The dimensions of variation are finalized and then the outcome space is constructed in the form of a diagram of the

categories of description illustrating their structural and inclusive relationships, to represent the variations in the way that teacher leadership is and can be experienced.

Preliminary Findings

The preliminary findings resulting from a Phase 1 and 2 analysis of data from the first six interviews are presented in Figure 2 and constitute tentative categories of description of distinctly different ways of experiencing the phenomenon of teacher leadership evident in the data. Each distinctive 'way of experiencing' teacher leadership in each bubble in the diagram is labelled with a title that reflects the meaning (referential component) of that particular way of experiencing, along with one or two representative quotations from the interviews and the particular leadership 'domain' in which that particular way of experiencing teacher leadership seems to be situated. (It is important to note that there is no significance attached to positioning of each bubble in the diagram, nor to the colours used and nor to the relative size of the bubbles).

Figure 2: Preliminary findings: Teacher leadership is variously experienced as…

Tentative dimensions of variation in these ways of experiencing teacher leadership evident in the data to date are presented in Figure 3. These dimensions of variation in their final form once all interviews have been conducted constitute threads that run across and help to differentiate the distinct ways of experiencing teacher leadership in each category in the outcome space.

Dimensions of variation	Variations
What **form** does teacher leadership take in the way it is experienced in each category?	Idea/Construct/Abstraction, Process, Act, Ideal, Conviction/Mission/Value, Philosophy, Individual Person/Human?
What is the **leadership domain** in each category?	Personal, profession, academy, school, (formal) education system, classroom, community, geopolitical, social, teachers' work?
What is the nature of the **desired change/influence sought** in the way TL is experienced in each category?	Curriculum innovation, pedagogical innovation, cultural change, school improvement, legitimise/valorise teaching profession, social justice, personal development, political change, new research agenda?
How or by whom is this influence **acknowledged/recognised?**	Peers (teachers), education system, broader community, academy, government?
"Making a difference" – for whom? Cui bono (who benefits? Whose interests are served?	Students, teachers, the teaching profession, the school, society?

Figure 3: Tentative dimensions of variation in ways of experiencing teacher leadership

It is important to note that the phenomenographic outcome space is not representative of any one individual's way of experiencing the phenomenon in question; rather, the findings are representative of the range of qualitatively different ways of experiencing the phenomenon, at the collective level (Akerlind, 2005).

Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

The study is a work in progress and the findings tentative, but nonetheless encouraging. Presentation of these preliminary findings to our peers at the EARDA conference provided a valuable opportunity for the researchers to consolidate the work undertaken to date, to reflect on strengths and limitations, and to seek peer feedback. This kind of opportunity also serves to enhance the communicative and pragmatic validity of the study's findings. Communicative validity of the findings depends on "a researcher's ability to argue persuasively for the particular interpretation that they have proposed", and secondly, help to ensure that "the research methods and final interpretation are regarded as appropriate by the relevant research community" (Akerlind 2007, p. 27). Pragmatic validity refers to "the extent to which the research outcomes are seen as useful (Sandberg, 1994 Kvale, 1996) and the extent to which they are meaningful to their intended audience (Uljens, 1996)…The prevalence of research seminars, conference presentations and peer-reviewed journals provides an obvious source of such validity checks" (Akerlind 2007, p. 27).

Therefore, in the interests of maximizing communicative and pragmatic validity, the following discussion questions were presented for consideration by those in attendance at the conference:

- What is your initial response when you look at the preliminary findings? Do they speak to you about teacher leadership? In what ways?
- How might the findings inform the work of the ISTL team in the current project?
- What more do we still need to find out in order to understand cross-cultural perspectives of teacher leadership, given the limitations of the current study? How might we do this?
- How might the findings inform the work of the ISTL team more broadly?
- How might the findings contribute to the teacher leadership research agenda?

- How might the findings be able to be used to support various stakeholders new to the area of teacher leadership (such as teachers, administrators, academics, researchers, policy-makers) to learn about and understand teacher leadership?

In conclusion, we look forward to continuing our study in the coming months and anticipate that our final findings will not only be representative of the range of qualitatively different ways of experiencing teacher leadership among the full membership of the ISTL research team, but that they will serve to:

- strengthen the ISTL research community by helping to build shared understandings whilst learning from differences in understanding – providing a "point of comparison" and "stimulus for dialogue" (Pham et al 2005, p. 17)
- strengthen the field/domain of teacher leadership research by adding to the body of knowledge about teacher leadership, and providing a framework for knowledge-building for those entering the field in the form of an "experiential framework" (Pham et al 2005, p. 17) for thinking about teacher leadership and teacher leadership research.

Finally and most importantly, we maintain that exposure to variation and critical differences in ways of experiencing a phenomenon brings about learning, allowing us to see where our own conceptions 'fit'; this in turn encourages more inclusive, more 'complete', richer understandings of the phenomenon. Therefore, by understanding how others see and experience 'Teacher Leadership' and 'Teacher Leadership Research', our own understanding of the both the research "object" (teacher leadership) and the research "territory" (teacher leadership research) is enhanced (Pham et al 2005, p. 2). Thus, for us to be able to conduct this study is a pleasure, a privilege and a valuable learning opportunity.

Keywords

Teacher leadership; Phenomenography; Teacher leadership research; Sociocultural leadership theory; Educational leadership

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