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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Life Stories of Teacher Leaders: A Qualitative Content Analysis

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Abstract

The teacher leader creates a path through which the students achieve their valued outcomes. The qualitative content analysis was used in the investigation. The application of correct inference and interpretation in qualitative content analysis allows the raw data to be categorized into manageable themes. Ten participants were recruited for the study. Each interview was conducted in their own office in the school. Semi-structured interviews were done based on the general questions asked by the key informants. Two qualitative research experts evaluated this set of interview guides twice. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Seven themes emerged in this study: questing for quality education through continuous involvement in curriculum development, nurturing an empowering and inspiring school climate, leveraging partnerships, networks, and linkages with the various stakeholders, exemplifying good leadership skills, amplifying open and transparent communication, developing systematic process of classroom observation and setting attainable standards outcomes and expectations for students and teachers. This study revealed the actions of teacher leaders working in Quirino Province, Philippines, regarding teacher leadership skills and their best practices. The seven themes show that teacher leaders are highly motivated to enhance student achievement. Stakeholders in education should place significant emphasis on promoting classroom teacher leadership. Thus, education administrators should design effective strategies to ensure that the current crop of teachers understands the importance and role of teacher leaders. By reflecting on these practices, teachers will be inspired to become teacher leaders in their fields.

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INTRODUCTION

Teachers determine students' success in the classroom. Warren's (2021) research supports the notion that the teacher is the most significant factor determining students' growth in the school. He mentioned that teacher leaders are both teachers and leaders. Efficient teachers need to be leaders for their students. They must possess leadership skills because it is fundamental to enhance teachers' instructional quality inside and outside the classroom. Furthermore, they are not only adept educators but also "strong teachers," demonstrating highly refined and effective teaching methodologies, and capable of taking on leadership roles among their peers (Miller, 2005).

For Katzenmeyer and Moller (2011), three adjectives are sufficient to describe teacher leaders: competent, credible, and approachable. Teacher-leaders' competence starts with their effectiveness in the classroom and establishes their credibility, but their approachability allows them to influence their fellow teachers. As per the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report, at least one in four 15-year-old students in 64 OECD countries complete their education without attaining the required proficiency level in reading, mathematics, or/and science. This figure translates to about 13 million low-performing students lacking the basic skills to sustain their country's economic growth in the future. This is an excellent compromise for national economies (Rohini & Pentang, 2023). Warren (2021) emphasized the imperative of addressing the persistent issue of poor academic performance by seeking enduring solutions. His research underscores the significance of teacher leadership as a pivotal factor within the school environment that significantly influences student achievement.

A teacher's developmental leadership degree greatly influences student motivation and performance. They mentioned that a high degree of teacher leadership in the classroom leads to a conducive learning environment that fosters educational motivation and promotes students' performance. In addition, Cheung et al. (2018) asserted the pivotal role of teacher leadership in the success of local school improvement initiatives. The authors identified four key activities integral to teacher leadership: collaborative engagement with fellow educators, exemplifying effective instructional practices, offering essential resources, and advocating for teachers. Furthermore, Kamaruzaman et al. (2020) underscored the extensive discourse surrounding teacher leadership, covering its definition, conceptualization, frameworks, and models encompassing power and influence. In essence, teacher leadership is recognized as comprising leadership roles assumed by teachers within and beyond the confines of the classroom. Teachers are regarded as experts in teaching and learning practices and skillful in managing the learning climate in the school. At the same time, they concluded in their study that teachers become leaders outside the classroom by collaborating with colleagues to ensure student outcomes and school improvement.

York-Barr and Duke (2004) defined teacher leadership as how teachers influence school community members to improve their teaching and learning. Dr. Jacobs said that teacher leadership is leading within and beyond the classroom. She shared that teachers can be leaders as they model best practices with skills that distinguish teacher leaders, like learning to communicate effectively, take initiative, and share expertise. Baker-Doyle (2017) stated that teacher leadership focuses on actions that transcend the teacher's formally assigned roles, such as sharing practices and making changes. The definition of teacher leadership also reflects the teacher's attitude, who continuously seeks to enhance their knowledge and skills, including frequently reflecting and working collaboratively with the school community to improve both within and outside the classroom (Pentang, 2021). Teacher leadership promotes student learning and achievement, including developing the school organization altogether (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Besides, Nguyen et al. (2019) asserted that teacher leadership enhances teaching quality, school effectiveness, and student learning. Wenner and Campbell (2017) argued that teacher leaders' roles transcend the classroom walls in working towards change and school improvement. Among the parts outside the classroom include helping other teachers, providing professional development programs for other teachers through

professional learning communities, and getting involved in policy and decision-making at certain levels in school. Thus, teacher leadership is seen as leadership across school boundaries (Muijs et al., 2013).

Teacher leadership effectively builds collective capacity to ensure and sustain a school and its system transformation. The concept of teacher leadership still struggles to thrive in school organizations. The study has highlighted two phenomena that challenge teacher leadership: the traditional 'principal-oriented' nature of leadership heavily entrenched in its system, the lack of leadership training, and the teacher classification they follow. The National Education Association gives the following attributes of teacher leaders: they foster a collaborative culture to promote student learning and educator growth, they use research to enhance student learning and practice, they support continuous improvement through promoting professional education, they facilitate advances in student learning, support the use of data and assessments to improve schools and districts foster collaboration with families and communities, they advocate for student learning and the teaching profession.

Despite assuming numerous responsibilities within and outside the classroom, teacher leaders always focus on positively impacting student learning. Sanocki found that one universal theme among teacher leaders is their shared belief that all formal or informal efforts should be centered on improving student learning. The New Teacher Center report shows that schools at lower levels of teacher leadership performed poorly compared to their higher-ranking counterparts. Being an effective teacher leader means having the capability to provide suitable learning and teaching processes to students, understand their unique needs, and stimulate them to be achievers. The teacher leader creates a path through which the students achieve their valued outcomes (high education performance). Promoting teacher leadership programs can aid in recruiting, motivating, and rewarding accomplished teachers. Training can encourage teachers' willingness to initiate positive changes in their schools. Teacher leadership programs should actively cultivate confidence and encourage educators to venture beyond their comfort zones, instilling in them a willingness to influence school reform (Helterbran, 2010; Uribe-Florez et al., 2014). Teachers can significantly impact students, colleagues, and the community by learning and exercising leadership in classrooms and schools.

One area that has not received significant attention in many studies is the promotion of teacher leadership. Research is needed to study effective strategies for developing teacher leaders, especially in the current educational context primarily influenced by technology. With these, this study aimed to reveal the opinions of teacher leaders working at Quirino National High School about teacher leadership skills and best practices. In this way, the best practices for developing teacher leaders were shared and examined, thus producing more effective and efficient teacher leaders. Hence, the study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What type of skills does a teacher-leader possess?
2. How does the teacher-leader employ the existing practices?
3. How do these practices impact the achievement of subordinates, students, and the community?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Participants

The research employed qualitative content analysis to delve deeply into the data's natural context. Through repeated examination and comparison, patterns and conclusions emerged as the researchers sought a comprehensive understanding. This approach facilitated an immersive exploration, incorporating the richness of authentic conversations and quotations to illuminate the ideas and practices of Quirino National High School teacher leaders. The participants in this investigation exclusively consisted of teacher leaders from Quirino National High School. The selection was purposeful and guided by a defined set of inclusion criteria, ensuring a well-rounded

representation of leadership roles within the school community. The criteria encompassed individuals holding positions such as Master Teacher, Head Teacher, Assistant School Principal, and Curriculum Chief. Participation in the study was voluntary, and the chosen participants engaged in one-on-one interviews, providing a nuanced perspective shaped by their dual experiences as classroom teachers and educational leaders in service. This research methodology was selected due to its timeliness and relevance to the nature of the study, aligning with the imperative to capture the current and pertinent insights of Quirino National High School's teacher leaders.

Data Collection Tools and Procedures

The researcher prepared and used an interview guide based on the specific research problems. It consisted of essential questions that would answer the state of the researcher's concern. Semi-structured interviews were done based on the general questions asked by the key informants. Two qualitative research experts evaluated this set of interview guides twice. In gathering necessary data, the researcher sought advice from her colleagues to tell who the study participants would be. After the tracing, the researcher asked for the school principal's approval last October 22, 2023. After the approval had been approved, the researcher consulted the participants about the questions. Before the interviews, the participants were informed about the study's purpose and significance and provided information about confidentiality issues. Face-to-face interviews were conducted on a designated day and time. The interviews with the participants lasted about 20 to 25 minutes. A note-taking material was utilized with the consent of the participants and then transcribed by the researcher.

Data Analysis

The researcher used Inductive Thematic Analysis in analyzing the data. Interview data were analyzed systematically following the six steps for inductive thematic analysis by Braun and Clark (2012). Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis method entails a six-step iterative process: (1) gaining familiarity with the data, (2) creating codes, (3) developing themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) identifying exemplars. In analyzing and interpreting the data, the researcher abstracted the information and gave each summary unit a code name. From the collected data, categories were reached, such as the leadership skills they must possess, the practices to develop teacher leaders, and the impact of teacher leaders. Then, the themes expressed by the codes were found. The findings were described and interpreted using the data.

To ensure credibility, it is one of the methods to ask experts in qualitative research to examine the examination in various dimensions. Therefore, in addition to reviewing related literature, the opinions of two experts from the school and a university were asked to ensure that the themes were classified correctly. The results obtained from the expert opinions were compared with the codes and themes obtained by the researcher. In the comparisons, the number of consensus and disagreement was determined, and the reliability formula developed by Miles and Huberman (2015) was used for the reliability of the data analysis. Direct quotations from the participants were also included in the presentation of the findings to support the themes. The obtained values were interpreted by presenting them in tables.

RESULTS

The rigorous qualitative content analysis applied to the data gathered from interviews with teacher leaders unveiled a spectrum of pivotal themes (Table 1). These encompass (1) a relentless pursuit of quality education manifested through sustained engagement in curriculum development; (2) cultivating an empowering and inspirational school climate; (3) harnessing partnerships, networks, and linkages with diverse stakeholders; (4) exemplifying exemplary leadership skills; (5) amplifying open and transparent communication; (6) establishing a systematic approach to classroom observation; and (7) setting realistic standards, outcomes, and expectations for both students and educators.

Table 1. Related themes and quotations

Theme	Quotation
Questing for quality education through continuous involvement in curriculum development	Active involvement in curriculum development ensures that our students receive a well-rounded and relevant education.
Nurturing an empowering and inspiring school climate	Leading a group of people is not easy to govern. You must build a harmonious relationship to gain empathy, cooperation, and unity.
Leveraging partnerships, networks, and linkages with the various stakeholders	I foster strong connections with parents and the community, creating a network of support that enhances the overall learning experience.
Exemplifying good leadership skills	Being a teacher, I lead the school or the class through my leadership skills. I need someone to lead a group with the right ingredients: knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values. Without these ingredients and efforts, you cannot lead the group.
Amplifying open and transparent communication	I have clear communication and collaboration among staff, learners, and stakeholders.
Developing a systematic process of classroom observation	I conduct thoughtful comments in the classroom, offering constructive feedback to help teachers refine their techniques and improve student engagement.
Setting attainable standards, outcomes, and expectations for students and teachers	As a Master Teacher, my approach to leadership involves setting high standards and leading by example. I value personal growth and professional development and exhibit high expectations for the profession by maintaining qualities that support my passion for teaching.

Questing for quality education through continuous involvement in curriculum development.

Curriculum is characterized as what is to be taught, in what order, in what way, and by whom (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004). Teachers are generally professionally prepared to engage in discussions of curriculum in this frame. Curriculum development entails the systematic design and creation of an educational curriculum. This process involves carefully selecting relevant learning objectives, content, instructional materials, assessment techniques, and resources. It follows a methodical approach in planning, implementing, and evaluating a course or program of study. Two participants shared:

Active involvement in curriculum development ensures that our students receive a well-rounded and relevant education. (P1)

I actively contribute to curriculum development and ensure engaging and relevant student learning experiences. (P2)

Nurturing an empowering and inspiring school climate. According to the study of York-Barr and Duke (2004), the teacher leader's role is nurtured when colleagues recognize it. Respect teacher leaders with subject-area and instructional expertise; high trust and positive working relationships exist among teacher peers and administrators; teacher-leader and administrator-leader domains are clearly defined, including their shared leadership responsibilities, and interpersonal relationships between teacher leaders and the principal flourish. Two of the participants said:

Leading a group of people is not easy to govern. You must build a harmonious relationship to gain empathy, cooperation, and unity. (P3)

Work together for a common goal. Share responsibilities and leverage each other's strengths. (P5)

Leveraging partnerships, networks, and linkages with the various stakeholders. Collaboration between schools and community organizations enhances the learning experience for all involved.

Such partnerships have the potential to fortify, bolster, and even revolutionize the participating entities, leading to heightened program quality, optimized resource utilization, and improved alignment of goals and curricula (Rohini & Pentang, 2023; Tolan & Woo, 2010). The narratives of the two participants are essential to consider:

I foster strong connections with parents and the community, creating a network of support that enhances the overall learning experience. (P1)

I engage with parents and the community, building strong partnerships to enrich students' learning journeys. (P2)

Exemplifying good leadership skills. This theme contains two related categories: leading by example and being a good follower. Teachers inspire and motivate colleagues and students to improve in life, influencing the behavior, attitude, and even the thoughts of the people around them. Two participants asserted their views:

Being a teacher, I lead the school or the class through my leadership skills. I need someone to lead a group with the right ingredients: knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values. Without these ingredients and efforts, you cannot lead the group. (P4)

I demonstrate responsibility, hard work, and a positive attitude. (P7)

They are amplifying open and clear communication. Teacher leaders can network and unite individuals, groups, communities, and affiliates toward a common cause, an active listener who paraphrases, mediate, and use conflict-resolution strategies, and collaborate with administrators, colleagues, legislative leaders, parents, and students, facilitate large and small groups, ignites others' interest in educational issues, manages group dynamics with sensitivity and skill and is a trustworthy and transparent team player. Two participants expressed their views:

Clear communication and collaboration among staff, learners, and stakeholders. (P6)

Good communication will always prevail to avoid misunderstanding. (P3)

Developing a systematic process of classroom observation. Classroom observation is a part of the life of teachers. It is a part of the journey where improvement, open-mindedness, and dealing with change happen. Teacher leaders tend to master this process since they see it as part of their career achievements. It has a two-way effect, improving the teacher's academic performance and, thus, the student's academic performance. Two of the participants said:

I conduct thoughtful observations in the classroom, offering constructive feedback to help teachers refine their techniques and improve student engagement. (P1)

I also conduct classroom observations to provide feedback, emphasizing the acknowledgment of successes and identifying areas for improvement. (P10)

Setting attainable standards, outcomes, and expectations for students and teachers. Expectations take everything into place, targeting a safe and effective learning environment. Teacher leaders develop tasks that require students to engage in higher-order thinking skills. They planned the objectives well to see if they aligned with the content standards. Two of the participants said:

As a Master Teacher, my approach to leadership involves setting high standards and leading by example. I value personal growth and professional development and exhibit high expectations for the profession by maintaining qualities supporting my passion for teaching. (P8)

Sharing my experiences, providing guidance, and offering constructive feedback to contribute to the professional development of my colleagues. (P9)

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to reveal the opinions of teacher leaders working at Quirino National High School about teacher leadership skills and their best practices. The first theme that emerged is questing for

quality education through continuous involvement in curriculum development. Developing teacher leaders who can engage in meaningful curriculum development and decision-making is essential to creating schools that offer all students comprehensive academic preparation through authentic and engaging curricula. For this theme, the participants consider engaging and relevant learning experiences for students. Agreeing with Pentang (2021), current teacher education models must be adjusted to provide preservice educators with adequate knowledge of curriculum theory and critical pedagogy so that these teachers may understand the curriculum at the deeper level necessary to make decisions beyond the classroom level. Educators leverage their expertise in effective teaching methods and pedagogical strategies to craft compelling and purposeful learning opportunities. Through ongoing reflection on their instructional techniques, soliciting and incorporating student feedback, and making necessary curriculum adjustments, teachers strive to enhance the overall effectiveness of their teaching. Actively engaging in curriculum development allows educators to tailor the learning experience to the needs of their students, thereby fostering learning outcomes.

Another important finding of the study was the theme of nurturing an empowering and inspiring school climate. This theme covers the positive work environment, guiding and supporting new teachers, organizing workshops and training sessions, creating a vibrant and empowering educational background, and building harmonious relationships. Based on a literature review from 1980 until 2004, the Teacher Leadership Framework was developed based on the need to empower teachers to optimize the school's operation for better outcome contributions. Thus, if the motivation of teacher leaders is sustained, teachers can create more learning opportunities and improve instructional practices that will lead to better student learning outcomes (Tsai, 2017). Therefore, teacher leadership is vital for education reform.

Regarding leveraging partnerships, networks, and linkages with the various stakeholders, the participants pointed out that teacher leaders must engage with parents and the community, fostering a strong partnership with stakeholders and collaboration among staff, learners, and stakeholders. Engaging with stakeholders builds more robust support for schools, encourages volunteerism, and fosters a sense of educational ownership. Muijs and Harris (2003) recommended four dimensions in teacher leadership roles. One dimension is teacher leaders' brokering role in establishing linkages between schools and maximizing opportunities for meaningful teacher development. In other words, this dimension refers to how teachers work across the school structure to create social linkages among the school community.

Another theme was exemplifying good leadership skills. This theme involves leading by example and being a good follower. The participants mentioned that they lead by example, embodying professionalism and a passion for continuous learning, encouraging others to do the same. Teachers play three crucial leadership functions in the classroom: role models, facilitators, and mediators. As role models, teacher leaders serve as examples to students and peers. They set the standard in the classroom through their behavior, character, and actions. They model the integrity and moral values of students. Classroom teacher leaders use their experience and knowledge to mentor and model effective practices for beginning teachers. Modeling allows beginning teachers to learn and apply the best teaching practices. Self-awareness refers to teachers' precise self-image regarding strengths, values, philosophy, and conduct (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2011; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Leading change, on the other hand, refers to the commitment of teachers to using practical approaches to foster meaningful change.

Amplifying open and clear communication was the fifth theme. The participants mentioned maintaining open and clear communication and fostering good communication to avoid misunderstanding. In the communication aspect, teachers display effective listening, oral, presentation, and written communication skills. Correspondingly, communication skills are essential to build a good rapport among teachers (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Therefore, teachers must possess good communication skills such as listening effectively, writing efficiently, and expressing meaningful language to build good relationships with the school community.

The sixth theme was developing a systematic process of classroom observation. The participants mentioned that thoughtful comments help teachers refine their techniques and improve student engagement. Teacher leaders who provide mentoring, coaching, and professional development opportunities help colleagues grow in their teaching careers, which can lead to better teaching practices and job satisfaction. Since teachers are regarded as change agents, teachers should have high self-esteem in ensuring school improvement and effectiveness (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Angelle (2017) combined several factors to measure teacher leadership in schools. The first factor is Sharing Expertise, which involves teachers' perception of their pedagogical skills, classroom management, and willingness to share their expertise with colleagues.

The last theme was setting attainable student and teacher standards, outcomes, and expectations. Teacher-leaders are professional educators and intellectual and critical learners in the teaching process. The depth of their disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge empowers teachers as professionals by providing authority and credibility to students and other educational stakeholders. Despite assuming numerous responsibilities within and outside the classroom, teacher leaders always focus on positively impacting student learning. Teachers acquire and utilize their professional knowledge and skills in instructional policy and leadership to offer students and adults compelling learning opportunities (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Hence, teachers use their teaching skills to improve organizational performance (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012).

CONCLUSION

The diverse definitions of teachers often converge on portraying educators as leaders within the school community. Understanding the essence of a teacher leader reveals a unique amalgamation of roles, where educators serve not only as purveyors of knowledge but also as perpetual learners in the dynamic process of teaching and learning. This dual role necessitates leadership skills, transforming teacher leaders into experienced and respected role models characterized by collaboration, respect, and innovation. Their ability to embrace positive change positions them as master facilitators of learning with impacts on colleagues, students, and the broader community.

The shared practices among teacher leaders, as gleaned from the respondents in this research study, underscore their profound influence on the achievements of students, colleagues, and the community's overall well-being. These practices contribute to successful individual endeavors and cultivate a collective drive towards positive change and a shared vision for a better world. This study serves as a beacon that illuminates the transformative power of teacher leadership. The insights garnered from the respondents serve as a source of inspiration for educators worldwide, encouraging them to adopt leadership roles within their respective fields. The reflective process stimulated by this research inspires teachers to aspire to become teacher leaders, instigating a collective call for continuous improvement. The contribution of this research extends beyond the realm of education, fostering a more profound appreciation among students for the dedication and love that teacher leaders invest in shaping a brighter future.

Furthermore, the implications drawn from the findings of this research extend to both current teacher leaders and future researchers. The positive feedback loop suggests that enhancing teaching practices and fostering professional growth among teachers correlates with improved student outcomes, thereby fortifying schools and nurturing more engaged, informed, and satisfied communities. As the primary school in the municipality of Quirino, QNHS, with its resounding tagline "Sa QNHS, may Future Ka," is urged to continue providing unwavering support to teacher leaders. This support is crucial in ensuring their continued positive impact on student achievement and inspiring new educators to embrace teacher leadership in their respective domains.

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