Understanding Teacher Leadership:
A Survey of the Field

Peter D. Wiens* iD
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, USA

Kim Metcalf
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, USA

Jacob Skousen iD
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, USA

Abstract	Article Info
Teacher leadership (TL) has become a popular topic in educational research whereby teachers have increasing responsibilities and voice outside of their classrooms. TL has been shown to be important for school reforms, teacher satisfaction, and student learning. The amount of research on TL has grown; however, it continues to be criticized for lacking a coherent definition and theoretical base. Additionally, TL, as a field of study, lacks any organization or regularly occurring meetings. This study surveyed international TL scholars using both Likert items and open-ended questions. Convergent mixed methods analysis showed that participants agreed that TL lacks a cohesive definition, but four common themes emerged from the data on the definition. This analysis shows that while specifics of TL differ across settings, there are some common understandings of TL.	

*Corresponding author
E-mail: peter.wiens@unlv.edu

Understanding Teacher Leadership: A Survey of the Field

Educational decentralization has been a trend in the United States since the mid-1980s with a particular aim to move away from a focus on individual leaders and hierarchical structures that too often result in teachers feeling overburdened, disenchanted, and alienated (Evans, 1996; Frymier, 1987). Shared governance has instead become more prevalent, whereby leadership is shared among a distributed group of professionals (Hallinger & Kovačević, 2021; Harris, 2003). One manifestation of this trend is the growing focus on teacher leadership (TL). Interest in TL as an academic field has grown in the last few decades (Pan et al., 2023) with 159 articles listed in the Scopus index over the previous two years that address the topic. However, as Berg and Zoellick (2019) state, "The research base on teacher leadership is notoriously weak" (p. 2). Even with this growth in research in the field of TL, there is no regularly functioning organization or meeting for scholars to come together and discuss issues specific to research in this area.

Meanwhile, the benefit of TL to schools has become increasingly clear. Research has consistently demonstrated that for schools to function optimally, teachers must be engaged in TL (Nguyen et al., 2020). When TL thrives in a school, teachers support each other towards instructional improvement (Fairman & MacKenzie, 2015; Miller et al., 2022). Likewise, school change is positively influenced through the

enactment of TL (Pan & Chen, 2021). TL has also been strongly associated with teacher job satisfaction (Bogler, 2001; Liu et al., 2021). Finally, TL has been correlated to student achievement (Sebastian et al., 2017; Shen et al., 2020).

Meanwhile, the benefit of TL to schools has become increasingly clear. Research has consistently demonstrated that for schools to function optimally, teachers must be engaged in TL (Nguyen et al., 2020). When TL thrives in a school, teachers support each other towards instructional improvement (Fairman & MacKenzie, 2015; Miller et al., 2022). Likewise, school change is positively influenced through the enactment of TL (Pan & Chen, 2021). TL has also been strongly associated with teacher job satisfaction (Bogler, 2001; Liu et al., 2021). Finally, TL has been correlated to student achievement (Sebastian et al., 2017; Shen et al., 2020).

However, the TL field has been criticized as being limited by the lack of a cohesive definition (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Claims have also been made that the research base in TL is weak (Berg & Zoellick, 2019) and that it lacks theoretical foundations (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). This mixed methods research project seeks to understand how scholars in the field of teacher leadership understand the nature of the field by asking the following research questions:

- To what extent do TL scholars consider it to be a distinct field of study?

- Is there a desire among TL scholars for a more organized professional structure of the field?

- Do TL scholars consider the field of TL to have a cohesive definition?

Review of Literature

Defining Teacher Leadership

While research and attention on TL has grown over the past three decades (Pan et al., 2023), the field has been criticized as ill-defined and lacking a cohesive definition (Berg & Zoellick, 2019; Cosenza, 2015; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). The literature indicates that TL encompasses everything from the first wave of traditional classroom roles like department chair, to the second wave of roles leading out of the classroom (such as team leaders, curriculum developers, reading specialists, etc.), and now to the third wave of TL focused on teachers as agents of school change in and out of the classroom (Silva et al., 2000) with a movement towards TL as transformational classroom leadership (Pounder, 2006). This article takes a broad view of TL and recognizes that it can be conceptualized and practiced in a variety of ways depending on the school, organizational, and policy context (Anderson, 2002; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Successful TL entails a distribution of leadership roles within the expertise areas of experienced teachers that disestablishes administrative hierarchy in order to model collaboration, create cross-curricular integration, promote collegial encouragement, form consensus among faculty, and display vigilant professionalism (Lambert, 2002). TL includes a variety

of responsibilities, such as mentoring for improved teacher practice, influencing the school for learning effectiveness, bridging gaps between administration and faculty, and contributing to a broader community of teacher leaders (Schott et al., 2020; Tsai, 2015). Thus, this study sought to further understand scholars' understanding of the definition of TL.

The research clearly indicates that context matters in TL (ex. Anderson, 2002; Arden & Okoko, 2021; Arden & Okoko, 2023). However, there have also been indications that certain aspects or conceptualizations of TL may be common across settings (Webber, 2021). The International Study of Teacher Leadership (Webber et al., 2023) examined TL in countries across the globe. That study found that TL is an "umbrella term that refers to the influence of primarily classroom-based teachers on the larger school community" (Webber & Andrews, 2023, p. 342). Within individual contexts there have been some attempts at defining TL. For example, one attempt at codifying TL in the United States has been the Teacher Leader Model Standards (Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, nd.). The Teacher Leader Model Standards organize TL into seven domains as follows:

> Domain I: Fostering a Collaborative Culture to Support Educator Development and Student Learning
>
> Domain II: Accessing and Using Research to Improve Practice and Student Learning
>
> Domain III: Promoting Professional Learning for Continuous Improvement
>
> Domain IV: Facilitating Improvements in Instruction and Student Learning

R E
A L

Wiens, Metcalf & Skousen (2024). Understanding teacher leadership: A survey of the field.

> Domain V: Promoting the Use of Assessments and Data for School and District Improvement
>
> Domain VI: Improving Outreach and Collaboration with Families and Community
>
> Domain VII: Advocating for Student Learning and the Profession

The Teacher Leader Model Standards have the potential to allow educators to see a third role within schools that has traditionally been divided between teachers and principals (von Frank, 2011) whereby teachers take on both formal and informal leadership positions and take part in school decision-making. These standards were developed by a broad consortium of partners from government agencies, education think tanks, universities, and preK-12 school district personnel. Additionally, these standards provide a framework for both teacher professional learning and conducting research (Ado, 2015). However, the Teacher Leader Model Standards continue to need more dissemination about teachers so they can better understand TL (Cosenza, 2015). Additionally, these standards have been criticized for not including building a shared vision and omitting effective classroom instruction (Berg et al., 2014). While the Teacher Leader Model Standards may have intended to provide a framework for defining and understanding the field of TL, it is unclear to what extent this has been achieved. This study builds on previous research by surveying scholars to understand their conceptions of TL as a unique field of study and their definitions of TL.

Teacher Leadership as a Field of Study

Another lingering question regarding TL is the extent to which it constitutes an independent field of study. As a field of study, it has

been criticized for lacking a theoretical foundation (Muijs & Harris, 2003; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Scholars in TL have relied heavily on theories developed in the school leadership and administration literature (Pan et al., 2023) such as distributed leadership (Muijs & Harris, 2003) and shared leadership (Wiens et al., 2024). Other authors have based their work in TL on more teacher-centered theories such as constructivism (Nerlino, 2020). These uncertain theoretical underpinnings may lead some to question whether TL can be considered a distinct field of study.

In the environment of scholarly empirical and theoretical work in a field of study, many academic fields are organized through professional associations. Both in the United States and around the world, scholars organize themselves according to specific fields of study in these professional organizations. However, TL, as a field of study, does not currently have such an organization. While there has been several meetings and conferences convened to discuss TL, these were "one off" events such as meetings of scholars at conferences not devoted specifically to TL. Organizations focused on leadership and administration as well as on teacher education can include elements of TL, but it is not the focus of either. Berg and Zoellick (2019) describe one such meeting of scholars dedicated to TL that met at the American Educational Research Conference. In this meeting scholars worked towards a conceptual framework of TL. However, these meetings were not sustained. The question remains whether or not TL scholars think of TL as a distinct field of study.

While scholarly work does not convincingly situate TL as a distinct field of study, universities and other teacher professional learning programs have continued to create and offer TL programs. Berg et al. (2019) documented 285 programs in the United States that support TL.

In some states these programs have even received financial support from state departments of education (Wiens et al., 2024). Berg et al. (2019) found that these programs provide support to teachers in three ways:

> *(1) preparation of teachers with knowledge and skills that can help them to lead; (2) positioning of teachers in leadership roles to capitalize upon their expertise; and (3) recognition of teachers as leaders through awards and other forms of appreciation or acknowledgement. (p. 3)*

Based on the understandings of teacher leadership, and derived from teacher education/curriculum and leadership/administration literature these programs prepare teachers to be leaders not as a pathway to administrative positions, but from their own classrooms.

Research and theory in TL are situated at the crossroads of the broad fields of teacher education/professional learning and leadership/administration. While TL literature is informed by theory and research in these fields, it does not fit comfortably in either field at the exclusion of the other. This paper sought to understand how scholars whose work focuses on TL, see the field as distinct from other fields of study while also understanding if TL lacks a cohesive definition and if there is a desire for more formalized structures in TL.

Methods

This study employed a convergent mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Data was collected through an online survey of TL scholars that included both Likert-style items and open-ended questions. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected

simultaneously, and coded separately before being analyzed together. The participants, instrument, and analysis are described in this section.

Sample

There were three types of TL scholars. First, were individuals publishing literature in TL. These TL scholars were identified as any person who published a work that was cataloged in the Scopus database during any time period and used the keywords "teacher leadership". The second group were individuals who teach in a university-based TL program. To identify these individuals, an internet search was conducted to find faculty members who taught in a TL university-based program. Any faculty or program email addresses found during this search were added to the mailing list. The mailing list included 641 valid email addresses. Finally, there is a list of scholars who attended the meeting described by Berg et al. (2019) at the American Educational Research Conference over the course of several years who signed up for a listserv. The survey was provided to participants through the Qualtrics online survey platform.

In all, 118 TL scholars completed at least some part of the survey. Due to the nature of our research questions, we asked very limited demographic questions. Not all participants responded to all questions. Of those that responded, 88.6% indicated that they were affiliated with a university and 11.4% were affiliated with other educational intuitions or retired. Participants came from 26 different countries as illustrated in Table 1. Of these countries, by far the largest number (n = 65) were located within the US. As shown in Table 2, 53.7% of participants responded that their institution had a TL program.

Table 1.

Participant Countries

Country	# Of Participants
Australia	4
Belgium	1
Brazil	1
Canada	6
China	1
Colombia	1
Estonia	1
Germany	1
Hong Kong	1
Indonesia	1
Ireland	1
Jordan	1
Lithuania	2
Malta	1
Netherlands	3
New Zealand	1
Portugal	1
Qatar	2
Singapore	5
Spain	3
Sweden	1
Switzerland	1
Taiwan	1
Turkey	3
United Kingdom	3
United States	65
Total	112*

* Not all participants listed their country.

Table 2.

Teacher Leadership Programs

Does your institution have a TL program?	Number of Responses
Yes	44 (53.7%)
No	38 (46.3%)
Total	82*

*Not all participants answered this question.

Instrument

The survey was developed by all three members of the research team to address the three research questions noted earlier. The research team collaborated equally in the question generation process based on their understanding of the literature and current practices in TL. In addition to the limited demographic questions, eight statements that were relevant to our research questions were selected for analysis. Participants responded to each question on a five-point Likert scale with the following scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither agree or disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, and 5 = strongly agree. The full list of questions can be seen in Table 3. One of the open-ended questions was selected for analysis whereby participants responded to an open-ended question related to their definition of TL.

Table 3.

Likert-style Survey Statements

Survey Statements
Teacher leadership is a distinctive field of study.
Teacher leadership research lacks a cohesive definition.
Teacher leadership research lacks a strong theoretical foundation.
Teacher leadership would benefit from having a professional conference dedicated to the empirical and theoretical study of the field.

Teacher leadership would benefit from having a professional conference dedicated to gathering individuals who lead teacher leadership training programs (ex. university programs, professional development organizations).

I am very interested in attending a regularly occurring North American conference dedicated to the study and development of teacher leadership.

I am very interested in joining a professional organization dedicated to the study and development of teacher leadership.

I would only attend a teacher leadership conference if it was associated with a conference I already attend (or held concurrently in the same place).

Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative analysis included examination of the Likert-style questions from the survey. Descriptive analysis was used to understand scholar responses to provide statements (Hinkle, et al., 2002). For each item, frequency counts were generated. These counts will be described below. Quantitative analysis was conducted using SPSS version 29 software.

Qualitative Analysis

In addition to the quantitative data, the present study also examined the perspectives of those engaged in teacher leadership on the meaning of teacher leadership. A single, open-ended question asked respondents: "How do you define teacher leadership?" The intent of the question was to encourage responses that reflected both a range of views and to attempt to identify commonalities or similarities across all or most narrative responses.

This study sought to refine scholarly and applicable definitions of the scope and nature of teacher leadership as perceived by those working in the field. It was intended not to confirm or reject a specific

hypothesis or to develop policy in the field, but rather to provide guidance that may help clarify what is or is not generally assumed to reflect work that can be considered unique to teacher leadership as distinct from other professional activities or roles of educators (see Krippendorf, 2004 and Neuendorf, 2002).

To this end, the second author conducted an iterative content analysis process of all responses to this question focused on identifying patterns (commonalities) and significant discontinuities across the range of responses provided. Constant comparative techniques described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), Estabrooks, Field and Morse (1994), and Tesch (1990) were used to further refine analytic categories. These techniques were applied iteratively until consistency of coding and resulting constructs was achieved as suggested by White and Marsh (2008). The first author read the data and checked the codes and provided feedback to the second author and any issues were settled through dialogue.

The process required six phases:

1. Individual responses were examined in randomly generated order to derive the original authors' intended meaning. Notes were made by the investigator clarifying intent and the rationale by which this intent was inferred, but no coding of responses was made at this phase.

2. Individual responses were again read in a newly randomized order to clarify or refine the investigator's interpretation of the original authors' meaning. Again, no coding was done at this phase.

3. Individual responses were again randomly ordered and descriptive codes were assigned to each distinct element of

aspect of teacher leadership referenced by the original author. Because individual responses frequently included reference to multiple elements or aspects of teacher leadership, each distinct reference was coded (i.e., multiple distinct codes could be assigned across a single extended response.

4. Individual responses were randomly reordered and descriptive codes were revisited and refined as deemed appropriate to appropriately describe the author's intent.

5. Coded response elements were organized into eight emerging categories that collectively encompassed each individual response element.

6. Individual responses were again randomly ordered (without codes) and response elements examined for assignment to the eight categories. This process resulted in four categories that reflected commonalities across respondents and fifth that included individual response elements that diverged from the common patterns.

Mixed Analysis

For mixed analysis we examined how both the qualitative and quantitative data answered the research questions together. This involved identifying concurrent and discordant themes between the two sets of data. The research team worked collaboratively on this stage of the process in order to boost the validity of the findings.

Results

Quantitative Data

We began the data analysis by calculating descriptive statistics for the Likert-style questions. Full participant response data can be seen in Table 4.We computed the frequencies of each response. The first statement read, "Teacher leadership is a distinctive field of study." Of the participants that responded to this item, 88.5% either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed. The most frequent response was "strongly agree" (n = 61). For the item, "Teacher leadership research lacks a cohesive definition", 72.8% of respondents selected either "strongly agree" or "somewhat agree". The most frequently selected response for this item was "somewhat agree" (n = 60). The third item that participants responded to was, "Teacher leadership research lacks a strong theoretical foundation." For this item, 48.7% of participants that responded indicated that they either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed. On the other hand, 32.7% of respondents selected either strongly disagree or somewhat disagree. The most frequent response was "somewhat agree" (n = 40); however, the second most frequent response was "somewhat disagree" (n = 32). For the item, "Teacher leadership would benefit from having a professional conference dedicated to the empirical and theoretical study of the field", 89.3% of individuals that responded selected either strongly agree or somewhat agree. The most frequent response was "strongly agree" (n = 61). The fifth Likert-style item was, "Teacher leadership would benefit from having a professional conference dedicated to gathering individuals who lead teacher leadership training programs", whereby 86.8% of respondents selected either "strongly agree" or "somewhat agree". The most frequently selected item was "strongly agree" (n = 65). The next item asked participants to respond to the

statement, "I am very interested in attending a regularly occurring North American conference dedicated to the study and development of teacher leadership." For this item, 60.1% of respondents either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed. The most frequent response was "somewhat agree" (n = 37); however, "strongly agree" (n = 31) and "neither agree nor disagree (n = 25) were close behind. For the statement, "I am very interested in joining a professional organization dedicated to the study and development of teacher leadership.", 78.0% or respondents selected either "strongly agree" or somewhat agree". The final Likert-style item read, "I would only attend a teacher leadership conference if it was associated with a conference I already attend (or held concurrently in the same place)." and 36.8% or respondents selected either "strongly agree" or "somewhat agree". However, 31.6% of respondents selected either "strongly disagree" or "somewhat disagree". The most frequently selected response was "neither agree nor disagree" (n = 36). "Somewhat agree" was the second most frequently selected response (n = 30).

Table 4.

Participant Responses to Likert Items with Response Numbers and Percentages

Statement	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly disagree	Total
Teacher leadership is a distinctive field of study.	61 53.98%	39 34.51%	5 4.42%	6 5.31%	2 1.77%	113
Teacher leadership research lacks a cohesive definition.	23 20.18%	60 52.63%	12 10.53%	16 14.04%	3 2.63%	114
Teacher leadership research lacks a strong theoretical foundation.	15 13.27	40 35.40%	21 18.58%	32 28.32%	5 4.42%	113
Teacher leadership would benefit from having a professional conference dedicated to the empirical and theoretical study of the field.	61 54.46%	39 34.82%	6 5.36%	6 5.36%	0 0%	112
Teacher leadership would benefit from having a professional conference dedicated to gathering individuals who lead teacher leadership training programs	65 57.02%	34 29.82%	10 8.77%	5 4.39%	0 0%	114
I am very interested in attending a regularly occurring North American conference dedicated to the study and development of teacher leadership.	31 27.43%	37 32.74%	25 22.12%	13 11.50%	7 6.19%	113
I am very interested in joining a professional organization dedicated to the study and development of teacher leadership.	42 36.84%	47 41.23%	14 12.28%	9 7.89%	2 1.75%	114
I would only attend a teacher leadership conference if it was associated with a conference I already attend (or held concurrently in the same place).	12 10.53%	30 26.32%	36 31.58%	17 14.91%	19 16.67%	114

R E
A L

Wiens, Metcalf & Skousen (2024). Understanding teacher leadership: A survey of the field.

Qualitative Data

Of the 118 survey respondents, all but three provided some response to the open-ended question, "How do you define teacher leadership?" These ranged from a single word to expansive, multi-paragraph responses. Across these, responses suggest that the item did, indeed, elicit thoughtful and insightful contributions. Some respondents acknowledged frustration about what they felt was a lack of consistency in defining teacher leadership ("The longer I do this, the less I know how to define it," or "This is the problem with this field – a definition that encompasses all of what scholars call 'teacher leadership' is so broad it's effectively useless"). Nonetheless, nearly every respondent provided insights into how to define or distinguish what teacher leadership is, what teacher leaders do, and the primary purposes or benefits of teacher leadership.

Content analytic methods (described above) identified four themes across responses. Each of the themes is discussed below.

Theme 1: Teacher leadership includes ongoing classroom and direct "student-facing" responsibilities. Nearly unanimously, respondents noted that a defining characteristic of teacher leadership is continued responsibility as an active classroom teacher. This sustained grounding in direct classroom or student engagement is, for many respondents what distinguishes teacher leadership from other forms of school leadership (e.g., administrative roles). This is reflected in the direct responses like *"…roles for educators who remain in student-facing positions to use their social capital through mentoring,"* and *"Teacher leaders are teachers who maintain K-12 classroom-based teaching responsibilities while also taking on leadership responsibilities outside the classroom."*

Others expanded on this basic idea, often by elaborating on the additional activities or responsibilities assumed by teacher leaders. For many respondents, this was directed toward instructional improvement within the professional learning community or school. For example,

> *[Teacher leaders are] classroom teachers who hold classroom teaching responsibility while also assuming a leadership role in improving and strengthening the instructional practices of other teachers in the school through mentoring individual teachers and leading the professional learning community.*

Or another,

> *People whose professional/organizational position is as a teacher (student-facing role in a classroom, primary responsibilities being teaching and learning) who take on leadership responsibilities related to instructional leadership among the instructional faculty in a school.*

Theme 2: Teacher leadership involves work and impact beyond one's own classroom. Respondents felt strongly that teacher leaders maintain classroom-based responsibilities. At the same time, all felt that teacher leadership required responsibility and impact "*beyond the scope of one's own classroo*m" and in ways that "contribute to improvement." A respondent from South Africa describes this well, "Teacher leaders [have and use] influence in different ways and on different terrains or areas inside and outside their classroom."

The breadth of the influence of teacher leaders was described differently among respondents. Several drew from noted scholars in the field (e.g., York-Barr & Duke, 2004) and emphasized that "teacher leadership occurs when teacher leaders influence their colleagues to

improve" often intended to "innovate and transform practices" and "advocate for development of best practices." Others explicitly noted that teacher leaders affect a range of education professionals both within and beyond a school or district. For example,

> *Teacher leadership is the process in which teachers, based on expertise and affinity, influence colleagues, school leaders, and others inside and outside the school.*

And,

> *Teachers who take on additional responsibilities to support school, district/CMO, or state-level initiatives to improve teaching and learning beyond the scope of their own students.*

This influence might include leadership among grade-level peers or at the department or school levels, but it need not be limited in this way. Many respondents felt that this impact might well extend across one's state or nationally. Common also was the idea that this impact should engage non-school audiences (e.g., communities, decision or policymakers, etc).

Theme 3: Teacher leadership manifests through formal and informal roles. An interesting theme throughout the responses was that teacher leadership was distinctly different from other formal roles in education. In many ways, this reflects a logical extension of the earlier themes, particularly in terms of establishing teacher leadership as something that differs from other forms of educational leadership. It is "defined by formal and informal roles" or, differently, "at the intersection of formal and informal leadership." In an extensive and thoughtful response that focused on the nature of teacher leadership, a respondent from New Zealand included,

The typical conception of leadership is according to position – a named role, with a title, status and remuneration. . . I think of teacher leadership more broadly so that it encompasses leadership according to position AND leadership as practice. This broader definition recognizes informal leadership and non-positional leadership by teachers.

Notably, not all respondents felt this way. For a small number of respondents, teacher leadership is defined in clearly formal ways. Some of these distinguish teacher leadership from administrative roles. For example, "District leaders or site level leaders who are not the principal." However, others did not. One respondent noted that teacher leadership is a state-defined role,

In my state, a Teacher Leader is a teacher in the K-12 setting [who] has obtained additional credentials to lead their peers and assist them with being more effective teachers. The Teacher Leader serves as a classroom teacher in a school and is either currently in or aspiring to take on a leadership role.

Theme 4: Teacher Leadership is a collaborative, interactive endeavor. Whether formal or informal in nature, respondents overwhelmingly spoke of Teacher Leadership in terms of influence or persuasion focused on the professional growth and development of oneself and others – "Teacher leadership is grounded, regardless of formal and informal roles, in teachers influencing others." Highlighted throughout responses was a focus on collaboration and engagement with professional peers. This "collegial" element of teacher leadership is reflected in each of these respondents' contributions,

I believe that we need to fuse/connect teaching, learning, and leading. The leading occurs in the flow of daily work as colleagues influence

each other with questions and insights about what works and why for students as learners.

Teacher Leadership is a shared endeavor rather than a solo activity which implies that educators have similar values and attributes that they share.

The "different terrains," as one respondent described them, in which this form of leadership was manifested were also frequently mentioned. In some cases, professional learning communities were specifically noted as a conducive setting for promoting teacher leadership. As in, "Assuming leadership roles through mentoring individual teachers and leading the professional learning community." In other cases, teacher leadership was described in ways that reflect shared decision-making responsibility within a school community – "I like to link the notion of teacher leadership with distributed leadership" or, more expansively, "teacher influence in different domains – instruction, discipline, curriculum, organizational management financial planning, hiring, etc."

It is important to note that these four themes represent generally consistently mentioned aspects of teacher leadership across all respondents, but they do not and cannot reflect the uniqueness or diversity of ideas that arose across the 115 responses. For instance, several respondents suggested that leadership, and particularly teacher leadership, should focus on justice and equity rather than on simply academic outcomes. Others referenced the benefits of teacher leadership, among them - "providing teachers voice and agency" or "fostering leadership advancement." And though not often explicated by respondents, the inherent, even unknowing leadership of teachers seemed common. As one respondent aptly stated, *"Teachers can be leaders without realizing it."*

It is also interesting that none of the respondents referenced the Teacher Leader Model Standards or other national or international standards documents for TL. The ways in which respondents describe teacher leadership often reflect constructs embedded within the Standards (e.g., building collaborative relationships and fostering teachers' professional development), but these are not explicitly linked with the Standards developed for the field. This suggests that the substance of many of the Standards reflects the views or experiences of those working in the field. However, it is not clear that the Standards have or do guide the work of teacher leaders or those who prepare them.

Mixed Results

The mixed analysis of data is centered around the third research question, "Do TL scholars consider the field of TL to have a cohesive definition?" The quantitative data provided two relevant statements related to this question, "Teacher leadership is a distinctive field of study" and "Teacher leadership lacks a cohesive definition". Quantitative data support that participants see TL as distinctive with 88.5% of respondents saying they agree with this idea. However, while they indicate they think of TL as a distinct field of study, the participants also agree that TL lacks a definition with 72.8% of respondents agreeing there is not a cohesive definition. The qualitative data reflect this ambivalence. Participants agree with the statement that TL lacks a cohesive definition, in providing their own definitions of TL, there was some level of agreement about four essential components of TL including ongoing student-facing (classroom) duties, work, and impact beyond one's own classroom, including both formal and informal roles, and collaboration. However, participants also acknowledged the difficulty with even trying to create a definition

with one scholar stating, "This is the problem with this field – a definition that encompasses all of what scholars call 'teacher leadership' is so broad it's useless."

While data did coalesce around the four themes, there was substantial variation in the comparative emphasis respondents placed on each of these. There was also far less agreement about the nature of the work of teacher leaders. Commonly TL behaviors included supporting or informing colleagues' professional practice (developing others professionally), empowering teachers by giving them "agency" or "voice", contributing to the community of learners, and improving student learning, achievement, and success was a very commonly mentioned aspect of a teacher leader's work. There were also areas in which little consensus was found in regard to some components of TL. For some participants, particularly those based in the United States, there was an emphasis on TL focused on issues of social justice. Nearly all participants agreed that TL involved both formal and informal roles; however, a subset of participants focused more on formal roles (department chair, union representative, or work in higher education). The mixed data show that TL scholars agree on some basic, fundamental aspects of TL, but beyond that there is variation in conceptions of TL.

Discussion

Defining Teacher Leadership has been a subject of increased research and discussion since the beginning of this century (Pan et al., 2023). However, the field has been criticized for lacking a cohesive definition (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). TL literature suggests that teacher leadership encompasses various roles, from traditional classroom responsibilities to broader roles aimed at initiating school-wide change

(Nguyen et al., 2020). Successful TL involves distributing leadership roles among experienced teachers to foster collaboration, integrate curricula, encourage colleagues, build consensus, and uphold professionalism (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; Schott et al., 2020).

Teacher Leadership as a Field of Study faces criticism for lacking a robust theoretical foundation and distinct organizational structure (Berg, & Zoellick, 2019). Meanwhile, unlike established academic fields, teacher leadership lacks a dedicated professional association, relying instead on sporadic conferences and meetings. Despite this, universities and professional learning programs continue to offer teacher leadership programs, reflecting a growing interest in cultivating teacher leadership skills (Berg et al., 2019). This study sought to understand how scholars conceptualize TL as a field of study, their definition of TL, and the need for a more organized structure in the field.

Previous research has shown that cross-national research in TL can reveal both common themes across contexts as well as distinct aspects of TL in local situations (Arden & Okoko, 2021, 2023). The purpose of this study was to examine if there was a consensus definition of TL as well as a further need for professional organization among TL scholars. Surveys administered to TL scholars reveal a consensus on the distinctiveness of teacher leadership as a field of study yet highlight a lack of cohesive definition. Qualitative analysis further underscores this ambivalence, revealing common themes such as teacher leadership involving ongoing classroom responsibilities, broader impacts beyond the classroom, formal and informal roles, and collaboration. However, variations in emphasis and differing interpretations suggest a need for further clarification and consensus in defining teacher leadership. Meanwhile, the participants in this

study recognized that TL, as a field of study, would benefit from a more organized structure including a professional organization and regularly occurring meetings or conferences.

Data presented in this study indicate that there are some shared understandings of what TL is as defined by participants in this study who consider a teacher leader someone with both student facing and adult facing responsibilities. Beyond that basic definition, it is more complicated. Webber and Andrews (2023), following an international study of TL, concluded that TL is an umbrella term for a broad range of teacher beliefs and behaviors. Instead of scholars continually wringing their hands about the lack of a cohesive definition (Berg & Zoellick, 2019; Cosenza, 2015; Wenner & Campbell, 2017), the field would benefit from using this basic idea of TL as a starting point for research and discussion about policies, practices, and theories that support teacher empowerment and leadership for the benefit of students in schools across the globe.

Limitations and Future Research

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first attempt to survey international TL scholars to better understand the status of the field. The first limitation of this study is the sample. The total number of participants is a fraction of the total number of scholars in TL internationally. This study makes no claim that this is a representative sample; however, it does provide the first examination of scholars' opinions on TL. Additionally, the sample is heavily weighted towards scholars from the United States. This is likely a reflection of where names and email addresses were identified. A recent bibliographic analysis of TL literature included in the SCOPUS index (Pan et al., 2023) found that 53.80% of works came from the United States. This is

similar to 58.04% of scholars in this sample were located in the United States. Certainly, there is a need to prioritize the scholarship of scholars from a broader range of countries to inform the discussion on TL.

This study sought to bring together the voices of scholars from around the world. However, there continues to be a need for international comparative work in TL. Webber (2021) makes a compelling case for the need for additional research in this area. Webber and colleagues (2023) have provided an excellent start to this work. However, as research indicates the context-specific applications of TL (Anderson, 2002), the need to better understand the conceptualizations and implementations across multiple contexts remains. This work needs to continue across countries and across different contexts within countries.

Conclusion

While scholars of TL continue to conclude that the field lacks cohesive definition, certain aspects of TL have emerged as key components of a definition. Specifically, TL scholars point to TL including student-facing as well as work beyond the classroom in formal and informal roles that is collaborative. However, for the field to move forward coalescing around a professional organization or a regularly occurring conference may be the next step in TL beginning a distinctive field of study. As scholars continue to conduct research and engage in the development of TL theories, the opportunity to further define and understand TL will continue to grow.

References

Ado, K. (2015). From pre-service to teacher leader: The early development of teacher leaders. *Issues in Teacher Education, 25*(1), 3-21.

Anderson, K. D. (2002). Changing roles and teacher leadership in schools. *Rural Educator, 23*(3), 1–6.

Arden, C. & Okoko, J. M. (2021). Exploring cross-cultural perspectives of teacher leadership among the members of an international research team: A phenomenographic study. *Research in Educational Administration & Leadership, 6*(1), 51-90. DOI: 10.30828/real/2021.1.3

Arden, C. & Okoko, J. M. (2023). Exploring cross-cultural perspectives of teacher leadership among the members of an international research team: A phenomenographic study. In C. F. Webber (Ed.). *Teacher Leadership in International Contexts* (pp. 51-81). Springer.

Berg, J. H., Carver, C. L., & Mangin, M. M. (2014). Teacher Leader Model Standards: Implications for preparation, policy, and practice. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education, 9*(2), 195-217. https://doi.org/10.1177/1942775113507714

Berg, J. H., Horn, P., Supovitz, J., & Margolis, J. (2019). *Typology of teacher leadership programs*. Research Report (#RR 2019-1). Consortium for Policy Research in Education, University of Pennsylvania.

Berg, J. H., & Zoellick, B. (2019). Teacher leadership: Toward a new conceptual framework. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, *4*(1), 2-14. https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCC-06-2018-0017

R E
A L

Bogler, R. (2001). The influence of leadership style on teacher job satisfaction. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 37*(5), 662-683. https://doi.org/10.1177/00131610121969460

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research.* Sage.

Cosenza, M. N. (2015). Defining teacher leadership: Affirming the Teacher Leader Model Standards. *Issues in Teacher Education, 24*(2), 79-99.

Estabrooks, J. A., Field, P. A., & Morse, J.M. (1994). Aggregating qualitative findings: An approach to theory development. *Qualitative Health Research* 4(4), 503-511. https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323940040

Evans, R. (1996). *The human side of school change.* Jossey-Bass.

Fairman, J. C., & Mackenzie, S. V. (2015). How teacher leaders influence others and understand their leadership. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 18*(1), 61-87. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2014.904002

Frymier, J. (1987). Bureaucracy and the neutering of teachers. *Phi Delta Kappan, 69*(1), 8-14. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20403522

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine.

Hallinger, P., & Kovačević, J. (2021). Science mapping the knowledge base in educational leadership and management: A longitudinal bibliometric analysis, 1960 to 2018. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 49*(1), 5-30. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1741143219859002

Harris, A. (2003). Distributed leadership in schools: Leading or misleading? *Management in Education, 16*(5), 10-13. https://doi.org/10.1177/089202060301600504

Hinkle, D. E., Wiersma, W., & Jurs, S. G. (2002). *Applied statistics for the behavioral science,* (5th ed). Houghton Mifflin.

Krippendorff, K. (2004). Reliability in content analysis: Some common misconceptions and recommendations. *Human Communication Research*, 30(*3*), 411-433. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.2004.tb00738.x

Lambert, L. (2002). A framework for shared leadership. *Educational leadership, 59*(8), 37-40.

Liu, Y., Bellibas, M. S., & Gumus, S. (2021). The effect of instructional leadership and distributed leadership on teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction: Mediating roles of supportive school culture and teacher collaboration. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 49*(3), 430-453. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220910438

Miller, D., Borasi, R., Borys, Z., Callard, C., Carson, C., & Occhino, M. (2022). Teacher Leaders' Roles, Preparation, and Impact in a District-Wide Digital Conversion. In N. Bond (Ed.) *The Power of Teacher Leaders* (pp. 66-80). Routledge.

Muijs, D., & Harris, A. (2003). Teacher leadership-improvement through empowerment? An   overview of the literature. *Educational Management & Administration, 31*(4), 437-448. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263211X030314007

Nerlino, E. (2020). A theoretical grounding of teacher leadership. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community, 5*(2), 117-128. https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCC-12-2019-0034

Neuendorf, K. A. (2002). *The content analysis guidebook.* Sage

Nguyen, D., Harris, A., & Ng, D. (2020). A review of the empirical research on teacher leadership (2003-2017). *Journal of Educational Administration, 58*(1), 60-80. http://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-02-2018-0023

Pan, H-L. W. & Chen, W-Y. (2021). How principal leadership facilitates teacher learning through teacher leadership: Determining the critical path. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 49*(3), 454-470. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220913553

Pan, H-L. W., Wiens, P. D., & Moyal, A. (2023). A bibliometric analysis of the teacher leadership scholarship. *Teaching and Teacher Education*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2022.103936

Pounder, J. S. (2006). Transformational classroom leadership: The fourth wave of teacher leadership?. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 34*(4), 533-545. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143206068216

Schott, C., van Roekel, H., & Tummers, L. G. (2020). Teacher leadership: A systematic review, methodological quality assessment and conceptual framework. *Educational Research Review, 31,* 100-352. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2020.100352

Sebastian, J., Huang, H., & Allensworth, E. (2017). Examining integrated leadership in high schools: Connecting principal and teacher leadership to organizational processes and student outcomes. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 28*(3), 463-488. https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2017.1319392

Shen, J., Wu, H., Reeves, P., Zheng, Y., Ryan, L., & Anderson, D. (2020). The association between teacher leadership and student achievement: A meta-analysis. *Educational Research Review, 31,* 100357. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2020.100357

Silva, D. Y., Gimbert, B., & Nolan, J. (2000). Sliding the doors: Locking and unlocking possibilities for teacher leadership. *Teacher College Record, 102*(4), 779-804.

Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium (nd.) *Teacher Leader Model Standards.* Author.

REAL

Wiens, Metcalf & Skousen (2024). Understanding teacher leadership: A survey of the field.

Tesch, R. (1990). *Qualitative research: Analysis types and software tools*. Routledge.

Tsai, K. C. (2015). A preliminary meta-analysis of teacher leadership. *Journal of Education and Literature, 3*(3), 131-137.

von Frank, V. (2011). Teacher leader standards. *Learning Forward, 6*(5), 1-4.

Webber, C. F. (2021). The need for cross-cultural exploration of teacher leadership. *Research in Educational Administration & Leadership, 6*(1), 17-49. DOI: 10.30828/real/2021.1.2

Webber, C. F., Conway, J. M., & van der Vyver, C. P. (2023). International Study of Teacher Leadership: A rationale and theoretical framework. In C. F. Webber (Ed.). *Teacher Leadership in International Contexts* (pp. 27-50). Springer.

Webber, C.F. & Andrews, D. (2023). Lessons learned from voices across the globe. In C. F.   Webber (Ed.). *Teacher Leadership in International Contexts* (pp. 323-344). Springer.

Wenner, J. A., & Campbell, T. (2017). The theoretical and empirical basis of teacher leadership: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research, 87*(1), 134-171. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654316653478

White, M. D. & Marsh, E. E. (2008). Content analysis: A flexible methodology. *Library Trends, 55*(1), 22-46.

Wiens, P. D., Beck, J. S., Hinton, K., & *Moyal, A. (2024). The complex web of teacher   leadership: Examining the relationships between instructional support, shared   leadership, and teacher satisfaction. *The Educational Forum, 88*(1), 94-106. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2023.2207106

York-Barr, J., & Duke, K. (2004). What do we know about teacher leadership? Findings from two decades of scholarship. *Review of Educational Research, 74*(3), 255-316. https://doi.org/10.3102%2F00346543074003255

About the authors:

Peter D. Wiens, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Teacher Education in the Department of Teaching and Learning at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). Dr. Wiens coordinates the Teacher Leadership graduate programs at UNLV and conducts research in teacher leadership, specifically teacher experiences with teacher leadership.

E-mail: peter.wiens@unlv.edu

Authorship credit details: Conceptualization of the framework, outlining the structure, leading the research and writing process; Designing the survey; Conducting the literature review, conducting quantitative analysis, synthesizing findings, and formulating core arguments; Coordinating co-author contributions, managing editing and revision processes.

Kim Metcalf, Ph.D., is a Professor of Teacher Education in the Department of Teaching and Learning at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). Dr. Metcalf teaches courses in research methods for teachers as well as curriculum foundations.

E-mail: kim.metcalf.unlv.edu

Authorship credit details: Conceptualization of the framework; Designing the survey; Conducting qualitative analysis; Contributing to revision processes.

Jacob Skousen, Ed.D., is an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership in the Department of Educational Psychology, Leadership, and Higher Education at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). Dr. Skousen is the coordinator of the Executive Educational Leadership program at UNLV. He conducts research focused on leadership development and educational equity.

E-mail: jacob.skousen@unlv.edu

Authorship credit details: Conceptualization of the framework; Designing the survey; Contributing to revision processes.