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Challenges and Opportunities for Teacher Leaders in Public Schools

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A B S T R A C T

This study explores the challenges encountered and emerging opportunities for teacher leaders in public schools. It employed the qualitative method of research, specifically phenomenological investigation. There are five participants, determined through purposive sampling. Thematic analysis was utilized in interpreting and analyzing data. Results of the study revealed the following challenges encountered by the teacher leaders: (1) Difficulty in managing time and harmonizing classroom and other functions/ roles; (2) The existence of "crab bucket culture" and isolation; (3) Lack of incentives or recognition for engaging in leadership activities; (4) Lack of leadership training and inadequate support and resources to carry out leadership functions; and (5) Uncertain opportunities for promotion of teacher leaders. The participants see teacher leadership as an opportunity to contribute to the school's success. More than taking charge, they consider their designations as being the voice of teachers in decision-making, an opportunity for personal and professional development, and motivation to perform better. Many teacher leaders spend their time as assistants in administration and management rather than utilizing their instructional expertise to improve teaching and learning. Therefore, teacher leaders need support to overcome challenges and barriers created by the norms of school culture.

A R T I C L E I N F O

1. INTRODUCTION

The Institute for Educational Leadership in 2001 affirms that students learn best when they have high-quality teachers (see https://iel.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Leadership-for-Student-Learning-Series-2-Teacher-04-2001.pdf). Gore *et al.* (2017) also proved that quality teaching results in quality learning. Indeed, teachers are vital resources for education. They have the power of empowering and transforming learners into productive citizens.

Globally, various government programs for teachers including opportunities for career growth and skills enhancement have become more accessible (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Over time, teachers' roles have evolved from classroom teachers in charge of instructions to more complex functions such as managerial and leadership roles in schools. Hence, the birth of teacher leadership. Teacher leadership is not a new concept and several studies had been conducted about it. However, no exact definition, scope, and requirements have been established yet. In the United States of America and most parts of Asia, teacher leadership is commonly viewed as the power of shared vision and collaboration (Mujis & Harris, 2006). Teacher leaders collectively work to strengthen the profession, but to them, leadership is not only cultivated by individuals, it is built and supported by a system.

Literature has shown that teacher leadership often focuses on three themes: participation in decision-making, collaboration with colleagues, and excellence in teaching. However, the need to sustain high-quality teachers to promote student learning is more difficult in practice. As mentioned by Ingersoll and Smith (2003), this begins with the recruitment and selection process of hiring new teachers to the satisfaction and retention of teachers in the profession.

Moreover, the recognition of teachers' roles and profession varies in the eyes of the public. The Varkey GEMS Foundation in 2013 revealed that in many countries, teachers no longer retain the elevated status that they used to enjoy (see https://www.varkeyfoundation.org/media/2787/2013globalteacherstatusindex.pdf). In addition, Gunter (2013) stated that for many years, teachers have been identified as the 'problem in education'. This declining respect for teachers will gradually weaken teaching, weaken learning, damage the learning opportunities for millions, and ultimately weaken societies around the world. Although, changing literature seems to support the crucial role of teachers in educational transformations.

In the Philippines, the implementation of the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, also known as the K to 12 Basic Education Program, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, and the decentralization have placed education in an era of high accountability, teacher competence, and student achievement (Abulencia, 2015). This promoted school-based management as a system of empowering the school to provide leadership. It widened decision-making and redefined the role of the school heads including staffing and managing personnel to complement the needs of the school for higher learning outcomes. This resulted in empowering teachers to perform other tasks in addition to their regular duties as classroom teachers.

Contrariwise, the teaching career still has a reputation of being an underpaid and seldom recognized profession. Reports have also indicated the existence of several issues including corruption within the education system (see https://www.philippinesbasiceducation.us/2013/08/corruption-in-public-schools-in.html), insufficient teaching and learning facilities and most of the provisions of the Magna Carta for Public School Teachers have yet to be enforced (see http://legacy.senate.gov.ph/lisdata/17081055!.pdf). Among all these, teachers face the societal conviction that learners' performance is directly associated with teachers'

competence and skills. Long-term discussions have been existing on these arguments and these greatly affect the morale of faculty and staff.

In the 2017 Global Innovation Index, the country ranked 113th out of 127 countries in the education category. The recent findings in the Programmed for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018, a standardized test to compare the quality of education across countries revealed that out of 79 participating countries, the country ranked last on reading comprehension and second to last in Mathematics and Science. These results prompted the Department of Education to implement reforms including teachers' and school heads' upskilling and reskilling through a transformed professional development program.

In the Division of Sorsogon, the performance level of learners has been below the standard set by the Department of Education. Although, this could be associated with several factors such as insufficiency of resources like textbooks, instructional materials and equipment, training on curriculum content and pedagogies, socioeconomic status, and health and nutrition, teachers' competence is an indispensable factor. Hence, the emergence of teachers who teach well and demonstrate leadership capabilities at the same time is a critical factor in the improvement and sustaining of changes in schools.

Furthermore, most school heads in the division often stay in the same school for 1 – 3 years only. Then they could be transferred or re-assigned to another school. The fast turnover of principals in schools has failed to fully implement great and promising endeavors. Therefore, since most teachers stay in the same school longer than the school head, it is a must to equip and empower them with leadership skills and opportunities.

The aforementioned facts and studies supporting the significance of teacher leadership and the challenging scenarios of Philippine education prompted the researcher to conduct the present study to determine the potential of teacher leadership as a critical factor in sustaining changes in schools and ensuring continuous improvement.

To date, the division's teacher leaders have not attended formal or structured teacher leadership training programs yet. Likewise, their role as teacher leaders has not been formally established or recognized. Undeniably, school administration and management cannot be effectively done by the school head alone. The participation of teachers is an indispensable factor in the success or failure of a school.

Hence, the researcher sees that it is worthwhile to determine the feasibility of teacher leadership in the division by identifying the manifested characteristics of teacher leaders along leadership skills, relationship with colleagues, and classroom management; the extent of their practices along the identified variables and ascertain if there is a significant relationship between the characteristics manifested by teacher leaders and the extent of their practices along the identified variables. The challenges encountered by teacher leaders are also determined as the basis of an attempt to organize a structured training design.

2. METHODS
2.1. The Research Designs

This study employed the qualitative method of research, specifically phenomenological investigation. The descriptive method of research was used to gather and analyze data to answer questions concerning teacher leadership.

2.2. The Participants

The primary source of data was the responses of 5 public elementary and secondary school teachers in the Division of Sorsogon considered teacher leaders in their respective schools.

They were selected through purposive sampling. The selection of participants was based on the identified characteristics and practices of teacher leaders.

2.3. The Instrument

An interview schedule was developed to determine the challenges encountered and emerging opportunities for teacher leaders in public schools. This tool employed an open-ended strategy through a semi-structured interview format in obtaining data. To ensure the validity of the instrument, content validation was done by the Education Program Supervisor.

2.4. Data Collection Procedures

The researcher first sought the permission of the Division and the school heads of the identified participants. Then, the researcher communicated with the participants through correspondence sent via e-mail. Upon confirmation, the researcher scheduled a one-on-one online interview with the participants. After the interview, the researcher proceeds to the analysis and interpretation of the data.

2.5. Data Analysis Procedures

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics specifically thematic analysis using inductive and deductive coding. The researcher established pre-determined themes (inductive coding) based on her previous study in 2020. Among the predetermined themes, the responses of the participants have associated with the following: (1) Difficulty in managing time and harmonizing classroom and other functions/ roles; (2) The existence of "crab bucket culture" and isolation; and (3) Lack of incentives or recognition for engaging in leadership activities. Moreover, the responses revealed the following additional themes (deductive coding): (4) Lack of leadership training and inadequate support and resources to carry out leadership functions; and (5) Uncertain opportunities for promotion of teacher leaders. 2.2 Wastewater and industrial water purification processes in the station.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
3.1. Tasks or Responsibilities Designated/Assigned to The Teacher Leaders Aside from Their Regular Teaching Loads

Table 1 shows that the current plantilla position of all participants is Teacher III, this means that their roles are focused on teaching, learning, and classroom management. However, their leadership skills, relationships with colleagues, and exemplary classroom management prompted their school heads to assign them to different administrative roles and ancillary services in addition to their regular teaching loads. This is the usual practice in understaffed schools. Teacher leaders oftentimes practice leadership, always build relationships with colleagues, and always implement classroom management. Although teacher leadership is not yet formally introduced and recognized in the Philippines, many teachers exemplify and practice teacher leadership.

3.2. Challenges encountered by teacher leaders

The challenges encountered by teacher leaders were determined through interviews. The researcher established pre-determined themes based on her previous study in 2020. These themes were considered to confirm whether these challenges were truly prevalent among teacher leaders. The themes are as follows: (1) Difficulty in managing time and harmonizing classroom and other functions/ roles; (2) Existence of "crab bucket culture" and isolation; (3) Insufficient/ Lack of structured teacher leadership training; (4) Inadequate time for

collaboration, learning, and leading; (5) Lack of incentives or recognition for engaging in leadership activities; (6) Exercise of authority becomes overly hierarchical instead of working collaboratively with colleagues; (7) Limited leadership opportunities for teachers in school/district/cluster; (8) Uncertainties on the ability of teachers to make sound decisions regarding school leadership and management; (9) Uncertainty about teacher leader versus principal domains of leadership; and (10) Inadequate communication and feedback among teacher leaders, principal, and staff.

Among the predetermined themes, challenges 1-8 were recognized that are happening, but the participants directly experience the following: (1) Difficulty in managing time and harmonizing classroom and other functions/ roles; (2) The existence of the "crab bucket culture" and isolation; and (3) Lack of incentives or recognition for engaging in leadership activities. Moreover, the responses revealed the following themes: (4) Lack of leadership training and inadequate support and resources to carry out leadership functions; and (5) Uncertain opportunities for promoting teacher leaders.

These challenges encountered by teacher leaders do not only impact their professional lives but also affect their personal and day-to-day lives. The succeeding discussions present the challenges encountered and their impact on the lives of the participants on professional and personal levels. To illustrate, codes are used to determine whether the responses are on a professional (PL1) or personal level (PL2).

Table 1. The participants.

Participants (Teacher Leaders, TL)	Plantilla Position	Designations
TL1	Teacher III	Class Adviser, Brigada Eskwela Coordinator, Learners Information System Coordinator
TL2	Teacher III	Supply Officer, Brigada Eskwela Coordinator, School Inventory Committee Member, Asst. School Librarian
TL3	Teacher III	Grade Level Coordinator, English Coordinator Community Linkages Coordinator
TL4	Teacher III	Senior High School Coordinator, Filipino Coordinator, Career Guidance Coordinator
TL5	Teacher III	Faculty President, Guidance Counselor Designate, Learning Activity Sheets Quality Assurance Member

3.2.1. Difficulty in managing time and harmonizing classroom and other functions/ roles

On PL1, all participants cited difficulty in managing time and overlapping school activities as major challenges of being a teacher leader. Teacher Leader (TL) 1 claimed that it is very difficult to meet the deadlines. As a result, reports and tasks assigned to him are sometimes submitted or carried out late.

On PL2, TL2 and TL5 cited that they need to work overtime (after work hours and on weekends) just to finish the reports and tasks assigned to them. TL3, TL4, and TL5 admitted that they are already experiencing too much stress, compromising their health and time for self-care and family.

"Trying to complete the school works in a day is very difficult. We were already exhausted, and the pandemic is making it even more difficult. Before we only have to prepare lessons for one modality (face-to-face), now, we have to prepare for distance learning as well,

because of blended learning. My time for my daughter is also sacrificed because I have to print modules and accomplish school forms and reports even at home." (TL5)

These responses are also evident in the study of Bongco and Ancho (2019) that teachers find it challenging to complete mandated tasks within the eight-hour workday and all participants unanimously believe that the said time is not enough to accomplish everything that must be done. Moreover, teachers show frustration that the workload, especially the 'related tasks' tends to be competing with the time that should have been spent teaching the students. Teachers claim that while the core function of teachers is to teach, they believe that they were not able to discharge this duty as they should, due to related tasks that take priority due to pressing deadlines.

3.2.2. The existence of "crab bucket culture" and isolation

Three out of five participants expressed their hesitations in performing the tasks assigned to them when dealing with teachers considered "seniors" in the field. Although they feel that they have leadership skills and innovative minds, they are sometimes discredited and ignored by a certain group of teachers (PL1). TL3 admitted that she often experiences being isolated because of the "seniority attitude" of some teachers under her supervision (PL2).

"*Sometimes in decision making, a "senior" teacher would reject my decision. Since she is older than me, the majority will just agree. Then, my decisions are overruled.*" (TL3).

TL4 and TL5 shared that they are also experiencing crab bucket culture.

"*I don't like to think much about it, but I feel like they are always waiting for me to fail. I can sense by the way they are treating me*", said TL4. "*Sometimes, I want to resign from my designations, but I always want to be productive, and I like it when I can contribute to the school.*" (TL5).

It can be inferred from the responses that instead of support, teacher leaders often feel isolated and "pulled down" by other teachers. They sometimes hesitate to perform the tasks assigned to them because of feelings of uncertainty. This perception revealed that crab mentality is one of the contributing factors to the issues and problems of Philippine education.

3.2.3. Lack of incentives or recognition for engaging in leadership activities.

Teacher leadership empowers teachers. One is motivation to lead, and incentives can provide various sources of motivation. To TL1 and TL3, recognition of their colleagues and principal was motivating them more than pay or prizes as incentives (PL1). However, TL2, TL4, and TL5 expressed dismay because oftentimes their efforts and initiatives are not recognized and when things go wrong, they are the ones to take the blame (PL2).

The lack of incentives for engaging in leadership activities has been shown empirically to impede the development of teacher leaders. The Philippine education system lacks incentives and motivation for teachers who perform leadership roles which prohibits them from stepping up as leaders. The idea is that only through recognition of their leadership capabilities can teachers have maximum impact on student achievement and school success.

3.2.4. Lack of leadership training and inadequate support and resources to carry out leadership functions.

The participants unanimously shared that they could carry out their functions better if they are to attend leadership training and if resources are adequately provided. All the participants in this study have not attended leadership training, yet. Moreover, they are all experiencing inadequate support and provision of school resources needed for teaching, learning, and performance of their additional duties (PL1).

"Being responsible and resourceful are often used to describe a good teacher. I just hope that this won't be used anymore to justify the failure of the government to provide for school needs." (TL3)

"I have been the school guidance counselor designate for almost 3 years now, but aside from one GAD orientation, I haven't attended any training relevant to learners' psychosocial support, yet. I recently finished my master's degree, but it did not help much because guidance counseling is not in line with my specialization. I think I was only chosen because of my classroom management skills and healthy relationship with students." (TL5)

"I am the supply officer and member of the school inspection team. However, I was not sent to attend relevant training. So, I just ask for guidance from my school head and supply officers from other schools." (TL2)

Therefore, professional development should be prioritized if teachers were to lead the improvement of the school and student learning in their instantaneous roles as teachers and leaders. The inadequacy of professional development training and programs across the system could also be the root of the displeasure and may be part of the reason behind some teachers' lack of confidence which made them shy away from practicing leadership duties (Alegado, 2018).

3.2.5. Uncertain opportunities for the promotion of teacher leaders

"I am a teacher for more than 10 years now, I finished my master's degree 6 years ago, but I am still in the Teacher III position. I thought my educational qualifications increase my chances of promotion. However, I am only given more designations but no increase in salary." (TL4)

"The requirements for master teacher promotions are difficult to meet. Even if a teacher is assigned to several designations and graduated/ earned units in master's if the number of teachers in a specific specialization in a school is not enough, a teacher will not be promoted." (TL1, TL2, TL3)

"Some school heads designate tasks to teachers even if it is not in line with their specialization. When this happens, the teachers cannot use their earned credentials for promotion. Oftentimes they are not recognized by the ranking committee." (TL2, TL5)

Despite the improvement in the process and promotion guidelines, teachers still find it very difficult to be promoted. In the Philippines, teachers can be promoted to the principal position through two different career tracks, one is the school administration track and the second is the master teacher career under the classroom teaching track with the criteria which include educational background, training, experience, and performance. To Alegado (2018), this can serve as a hindrance to teacher leadership because these policies do not encourage teacher leadership and these policies discourage those with leadership potential

but without further academic qualifications or teachers who can lead but no incentives. Also, teachers do not enjoy ample support from such policies.

Hence, the lack of opportunities for professional growth is a source of frustration and a burden to teacher leadership. No training programs are facilitated that could expose teachers to new knowledge and teaching approaches for them to grow professionally.

3.3. The Emerging Opportunities for Teacher Leaders

The participants see teacher leadership as an opportunity to contribute to the school's success. More than taking charge, they consider their designations as being the voice of teachers in decision-making, an opportunity for personal and professional development, and motivation to perform better.

"Of course, I want to be promoted to increase my salary. But if it is not possible at the moment it is okay for me. I enjoy being a leader, my school head involves me in decision-making, and I represent my co-teachers and learners, so I already have a sense of fulfillment." (TL5)

"Because of my designations, I can enhance self-management, improve work ethics, and maintain motivation to work under pressure." (TL2, TL4)

"My decision-making and problem-solving skills improved. My co-teachers trust my suggestions when there are issues and problems in the classroom and school. I was also given the chance to speak during school conferences and training." (TL1, TL4)

The responses reflect why the participants are considered leaders. They have acquired the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary in leading fellow teachers and contributing to the school's success. That is why despite the challenges they encounter; teacher leaders are hopeful of the opportunities coming their way. Their current roles serve as a springboard to further personal and professional growth.

Teachers can advance in the profession through one of two career tracks - school administration (leadership) or classroom teaching. A teacher may eventually be promoted as principal following the school administration career track or as Master Teacher under the teaching career track. There are four Master Teacher levels and for each level, there are prescribed qualifications measured in terms of educational preparation, performance rating, and teaching experience. There is a quota system for the allowable master teacher positions in the schools. Master Teachers have regular teaching loads but are expected to guide other teachers toward improving their competencies and to take the lead in the preparation of instructional materials. Master Teachers also serve as demonstration teachers whose classes are made available as exemplars whenever there are visitors. The school administration track covers headteachers and principals. There are six Head Teacher levels and four Principal levels with specific requirements and corresponding compensation rates. Teachers who aspire to be promoted to headteacher levels or principal positions need to comply with the criteria which include educational background, training, experience, and performance.

Moreover, it is also possible for them to branch out from what they already know and expand upon the expertise they have already gained. It could be transitioning to a new role entirely or simply enhancing their duties while remaining in the classroom with their students. The following are the possible career path for teacher leaders: specialist roles, department head, college professor, administrative positions, researcher, curriculum developers, and community builders.

3.4. Action Steps in Overcoming the Challenges in Teacher Leadership to Maximize Opportunities

Teacher leaders' roles are seldom well-defined. Some school heads consider teacher leaders as a source of manpower when schools are understaffed. As a result, many teacher leaders spend their time as assistants in administration and management—managing the canteen, substituting for absent teachers/staff, or supervising the logistics—rather than utilizing their instructional expertise to improve teaching and learning. At present, there is no structured system for teacher leadership in the division of Sorsogon. In fact, it is not known to many yet. Although teacher leadership practices are now evident in schools, it has not been formally introduced. Therefore, teacher leaders need support to overcome challenges and barriers created by the norms of school culture.

The participants shared their strategies for overcoming the barriers and challenges of teacher leadership, such as: (1) Have a positive mindset – having a positive outlook will surely beget productive results; (2) Acceptance – in accepting the responsibilities one must anticipate challenges and in doing so rewarding results such as self-resiliency and accountability is also expected; (3) Ask for help – accept that in times of challenges, one needs help and support; (4) Be pro-active – prepare for challenges and opportunities that may come, look at every possible outcome and anticipate risks and failures; (5) Educate self – expose self to learning opportunities to maintain active and decisive mind; (6) Be consistent with actions – focus on tasks and the organization's goals, not personal ambition; (7) Be patient – do not entertain negativity, work with genuine intentions, focus on learners, and trust that all efforts are worthwhile; (8) Manage time and be flexible.

These strategies are related to the suggestions cited by National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality in 2007 to encourage teacher leadership: (1) Value and respect the role and work of teacher leaders; (2) Embrace change and allow data-driven, research-based risk-taking; (3) Provide affirmation for teachers' leadership tasks; (4) Promote and facilitate collaboration; (5) Provide technical support for teacher leaders; (6) Empower teachers in their leadership tasks; and (7) Involve faculty in decision-making (see https://gtlcenter.org/sites/default/files/docs/EnhancingTeacherLeadership.pdf).

4. CONCLUSION

Teachers' roles are focused on teaching, learning, and classroom management. However, their leadership skills, relationships with colleagues, and exemplary classroom management prompted their school heads to assign them to different administrative roles and ancillary services in addition to their regular teaching loads. Hence, they are considered teacher leaders.

The participants see teacher leadership as an opportunity to contribute to the school's success. More than taking charge, they consider their designations as being the voice of teachers in decision-making, an opportunity for personal and professional development, and motivation to perform better. Teacher leaders have acquired the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary in leading fellow teachers and contributing to the school's success. This is why despite the challenges they encounter; teacher leaders are hopeful of the opportunities coming their way. Their current roles serve as a springboard to further personal and professional growth.

The participants in this study are considered teacher leaders in their respective schools. Their responses revealed the following challenges encountered by teacher leaders in carrying out their roles: (1) Difficulty in managing time and harmonizing classroom and other

functions/ roles; (2) The existence of the "crab bucket culture" and isolation; (3) Lack of incentives or recognition for engaging in leadership activities; (4) Lack of leadership training and inadequate support and resources to carry out leadership functions; and (5) Uncertain opportunities for promotion of teacher leaders.

Based on the results of this inquiry the following strategies adapted from the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality in 2007 are recommended by the researcher to mitigate the impact of the challenges of teacher leadership: Strategy 1 – Improve the school workforce – hire more teaching and non-teaching personnel, delegate tasks equitably, and consider the teacher's specialization, skills, and potential in delegating tasks. Strategy 2 – Formally introduce and recognize the importance of teacher leadership; Strategy 3 – Establish teacher leadership training and development programs; Strategy 4 – Support and create opportunities for teacher leaders; Strategy 5 – Build professional learning communities (PLCs); Strategy 6 – Encourage professionalism and healthy faculty and staff relationships.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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