

The 'Trials and Tribulations' of Environmental Teacher Leaders

Highlights of a Study on Barriers to Eco Teacher Leader Success

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Teacher Leaders – an unappreciated role?

When the term 'school leader' is mentioned, many people summon up the image of the school principal. Yet, the school is full of leaders. Teacher leaders are often under-appreciated and their contributions frequently go unrecognized.
(Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009)

Mixed-Methods Study Design

Quantitative data was collected first, using a teacher leadership survey completed by EcoSchool lead teachers to provide a preliminary overview of issues. This was followed by a semi-structured interview phase to collect qualitative data to "enhance, elaborate or complement the data from the other source".
(Creswell, 2012, p. 537)

Brief Background on Environmental Teacher Leadership

Concerns regarding the sustainability of human actions on our planet have reached dramatic levels locally, provincially and internationally. The last few decades have seen increasing global recognition that the challenges associated with environmental efforts have important connections with education and schooling (United Nations, 1992) and curriculum development (OECD, 1995). It is becoming more and more apparent that education plays an importance role in the fight against climate change. However, studies have found that environmental education has not been uniformly implemented in schools (Puk & Makin, 2006; Tan & Pedretti, 2010). Classroom teachers have cited barriers such as insufficient planning time, lack of funding and resources, and few professional learning opportunities (Fazio & Karrow, 2013).

There has, however, been a growing trend of teachers who remain full-time in the classroom but who also informally take on a school-wide leadership role to encourage sustainability measures and improve eco literacy. In Ontario, Canada, over 1500 teachers have stepped up to certify their school in the provincial EcoSchools program. While a few studies have found that this model of using school-wide teacher leaders has a positive impact on environmental education initiatives, (Fazio & Karrow, 2013; Jita & Mohele, 2013) little is known about the supports required to attract and retain teachers in this vital leadership role.

The Study

The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of what motivates teachers to take on an informal environmental leadership role in their school and to determine what factors help or hinder them in carrying out their tasks as leaders.

Sequential Mixed-Methods Design



Study Results

Motivation and Satisfaction

- The majority of participants (76%) indicated that they were intrinsically motivated to take on the role of EcoSchool teacher leader due to their concern for the environment. This was often coupled with a desire to support student learning (67%). As one survey participant stated: *"The most important benefit to me is helping students recognize the importance of being good stewards of the earth and understanding some of the environmental issues we are facing"*.
- Despite their motivation, this study found that not all participants were willing to persevere as leaders, as 19% of survey respondents indicated that they were not 'very' or 'highly' likely to continue. In addition, 31% were neither 'very' nor 'highly' satisfied. Survey analysis showed that teachers who indicated less satisfaction in their role as EcoSchools teacher leader felt that their school was not as supportive of teacher leadership. Further results found that even those who were satisfied felt frustrated by a number of barriers.

Resistance from Other Teachers

- Other teachers were found to be one of the biggest barriers to teacher leadership. While eco teacher leaders greatly appreciated working as a team with a few "allies", most also encountered resistance from other teachers on staff.
- Some teacher leaders met with outright opposition from other teachers during initiatives, while others found resistance was more subtle. Many participants felt that simply fighting the apathy of their co-workers was exhausting and hindered their success: *"When I proposed doing a whole school Earth Hour event... there was very little take up. It felt like it was actually just a bother to them to be asked to do it."* (Interview participant)

Obstructive School Structures and Cultures

- Some participants admitted they were disappointed that verbal praise like 'good job' was often the extent of their principal's support. Many teacher leaders wished their principal would understand that they hold the power to optimize supervision schedules, planning time, teacher schedules, release time, and also by provide access to space and resources.
- School cultures were found to be a significant concern. The survey question: *'There is a general satisfaction with the work environment among teachers at my school'* received the lowest scores. Few principals exhibited a distributed style of leadership, as few administrators worked in partnership with their teacher leaders or sought out their opinions.

Some Barriers are Unique to Environmental Teachers

- **'Green fatigue' or 'eco-anxiety'**. The barrage of media reports of environmental doom and gloom may be causing colleagues to feel overwhelmed and too discouraged to engage.
- **Implicit Criticism**. The role includes encouraging others to undertake belief or behaviour changes, yet even when using a tactful approach, this might be seen as implicit criticism by staff.
- **Varying Degrees of Interest by the Principal**. Many initiatives are mandated by the district or Ministry, and the principal is tasked to be the driving force to make change happen. These directives often take priority over the 'grass roots' voluntary initiatives, such as the EcoSchools program.

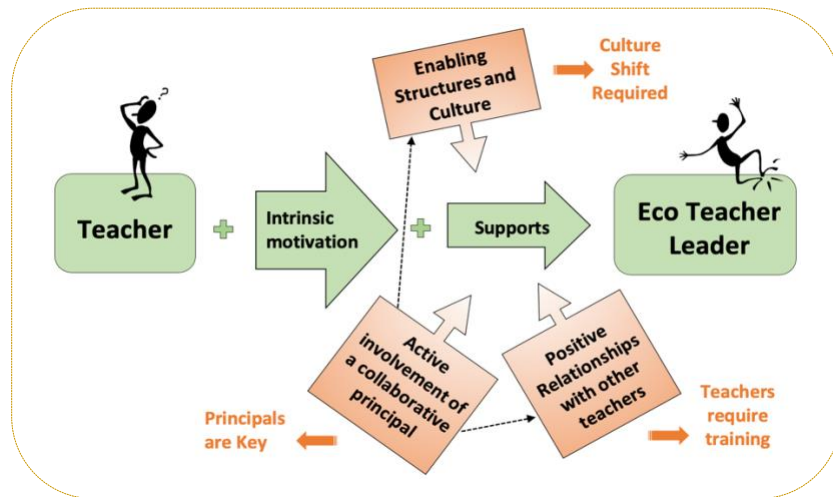
Time for a Global Culture Shift?

It is time to rethink how we value our teacher leaders, who step up and courageously take on challenging social or eco justice leadership roles where they must advocate to change both beliefs and practices.



The teacher leadership model needs to change, with new school and district support systems: “How can we ask teachers, to give 110% in the classroom and then give **more**? Yes, I know some teachers who would be incredible leaders, but is it fair to ask them to step up and risk burn out?” (Interview Participant)

Conclusions



“Teachers can only become leaders within schools when the school culture is clearly committed to providing support for the learning of all its members.” (Silva et al., 2000 p. 802)

Principals are Key to Supporting Teacher Leadership by:

- ▶ **Supporting teachers to navigate difficult teacher leader-teacher relationships.** Teachers need PD and mentoring in order to navigate pervasive micropolitics
- ▶ **Putting enabling school structures in place** such as optimized scheduling and actively providing support and resources.
- ▶ **Fostering a positive school culture** by using a collaborative, distributed leadership style, and valuing teacher leaders as equals.

Districts Need to Support Teacher Leadership by:

- ▶ **Supporting principals with professional learning on how they can better support teacher leadership.** Principal workload and demands are ever increasing (Pollock & Hauseman, 2015). Thus, districts need to support teacher leadership by supporting principals.
- ▶ **Initiating a culture shift** by demonstrating a change in thinking about the way teacher leadership is valued and by dismantling outdated, hierarchical structures and consider the implementation of significant supports and resources. Expecting full-time teachers to add to their already over-full plates without significant backing is perhaps naïve, especially environmental teacher leaders who face additional unique challenges.

System-wide change may be the way forward to attract, retain, and protect the future of teacher leadership, as the status quo may not be conducive to the continued professional or personal growth of our vital teacher leaders.

References

To access the full study or view the references cited in this highlights document, go to: Acton, K. S. (2019). *Environmental teacher leaders: Motivation, supports and barriers*. https://space.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/96504/1/Acton_Karen_S_201906_PhD_thesis.pdf