

## Teacher Leaders as Professional Development Providers: Factors Driving Teacher Learning Opportunities

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### Abstract

*High stakes assessments mandated by 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) have increased the focus on student achievement causing a closer examination of the link between student achievement and teacher quality. Teacher training, through the use of teacher leaders as professional development providers, has been documented to be one of the most important factors in student achievement. This study's purpose was to examine teacher leaders who receive their own professional development through a University Literacy Center, and what they did as professional development providers in their schools. A case study followed three teacher leaders in an effort to describe factors that influenced the professional development they provided.*

The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was based on the premise that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals would improve educational outcomes. High stakes assessments mandated by NCLB increased the focus on student achievement (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2006). However, difficulties meeting performance standards related to NCLB and now the Common Core State Standards have caused closer examination of the link between student achievement and teacher quality. This evidence-based relationship has highlighted the importance of improving the effectiveness of teacher professional development (Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapley, 2007). In-service teacher training, through professional development, has been documented as one of the most important factors in student achievement and may in fact be one of the few indicators of student success that a school can control (Guskey, 2000; Yoon, et. al., 2007). Thus, high quality, on-going professional development is essential in promoting teacher growth, quality classroom instruction, and ultimately, student learning (Hawley, & Valli, 1998; Yoon et. al., 2007).

Given today's current climate of high-stakes accountability and the related emphasis on teacher quality, it is more important than ever for teachers to define their roles, in part, as lifelong learners through participation in professional development (Reeves, 2010). This, in turn, creates an urgency to increase the effectiveness of professional development; it is a critical component in advancing student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Strong, 2010). However, professional development in education can often be overlooked and/or poorly implemented. While many federal, state and local mandates require that teachers have professional development plans, inadequate attention is seldom given to the ways in which those professional development plans are carried out (Clarke & Hollingsworth 2002). Another issue jeopardizing implementation of quality professional development is the manner in which it is prescribed (Darling-Hammond, 1996). We often see policy makers dictating what teachers should be learning, or calling for new programs without the necessary and/or appropriate professional development. This top-down approach causes ineffective (perhaps even non-existent) implementation of professional development. In response, professional development in many schools has been undergoing a transformation.

They are changing from the traditional emphasis on one-day workshops (often provided out of district, or by outside consultants that come in) to a more innovative and increasingly common, in-district, teacher-led, and consistently sustained professional learning (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001) through teacher leaders.

Teachers who work together, share ideas, and provide critical feedback with each other over time are more likely to improve their skills as they collaborate with colleagues (Danielson, 2006; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Reeves, 2008;). This typically multifaceted type of professional development enables teachers to experience meaningful opportunities to increase their effectiveness and enhance their core teaching strategies (Cohen & Hill, 2001; Hallman, Wenzel & Fendt, 2004; Hawley & Valli, 1999). In doing so, they simultaneously create a community of practice which has been documented to be an effective context for learning (Wenger, 1999).

### ***What Does the Research Say About Teacher Leaders?***

One of the most effective means of providing professional development for teachers is the implementation of teacher leaders (Blasé & Blasé, 2004; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Mangin & Stoelinga, 2008). Stoelinga's case study, (in Mangin & Stoelinga, 2008), highlights the impetus for educational organizations to move toward the teacher leader role in schools and ways to successfully support the initiative. In the three portraits of literacy coordinators studied, researchers concluded that teachers in leadership roles need to align themselves between formal and informal positions, that they represent strong values within the school culture, and the level of communication is critical in their leadership roles. Since teacher leaders are a permanent presence in their schools, they foster an atmosphere of continued learning and development for the entire teaching staff. Organizing schools into frameworks that encourage teacher leadership is proven to be a key strategy for fostering authentic and embedded professional development, improving teaching practices, and promoting student progress (Blasé & Blasé, 2004; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Mangin & Stoelings, 2008; Miller, 2004).

Research indicates that one of the more powerful ways to facilitate meaningful professional development is through the activities of teacher leaders. According to Lindstrom and Speck (2004), professional development should be a "lifelong, collaborative process that nourishes the growth of individuals, teams, and schools through a daily, job-embedded, learner-centered, focused approach" (pg. 22). The goal of professional development, according to Loucks-Horseley (1997), is that it should contribute to a lasting change in our educational system. In order for teachers to be a part of a life-long learning process that makes a difference in improving educational outcomes, they must have identities as learners, in addition to teachers (Miller, Wallace, DiBiase, & Nesbit, 1999; Fisher, Frey, & Nelson, 2012). However, recent research has found that the professional development in which teachers participate often does little to forward these aims. Teacher leaders have the potential to move professional development in a more positive direction through the ability to increase sustainable learning opportunities in schools.

Teacher leaders are well positioned to implement effective professional development, as they are typically those who have both strong leadership abilities and content knowledge. Teacher leaders who function in more formal roles do not have the responsibility of a classroom. This allows them time to facilitate professional learning opportunities for their colleagues. Quality teacher leadership is important to the overall success of an individual school or school system. As professional development providers, they can plan, observe, model and co-teach to improve teacher learning, and ultimately student achievement. Research shows that teacher leaders can help insure that teachers enhance their professional knowledge. Teacher leaders working alongside their colleagues can engage in activities ranging from school-wide support for the implementation of new programs to assisting struggling teachers on an individual basis (Lieberman, 1996, Silva, Gimbert, & Nolan, 2000). Regardless of the activity, interactions with teacher leaders tend to improve teachers' knowledge (Collet, 2012). Two common strategies that teacher leaders use when fulfilling their roles as professional development providers are turnkey training and instructional coaching. Although these strategies are not exhaustive of what teacher leaders do, they are appropriate for focus in the context of this study because they align with research on effective professional development models. Teacher leaders who participate in professional development activities such as those provided by the University Literacy Center, as the participants in this study do, are well positioned to act as turnkey trainers who can share the information they gain with their colleagues. Furthermore, coaching is an effective strategy in which teacher leaders take part while working with their colleagues.

Coaching can create teacher-centered, differentiated professional development that meets multiple needs within the learning community.

Although teacher leaders are well positioned to provide research-based professional development, there are many barriers to implementing effective models. Funding is one barrier to providing effective professional development stems. Hornbeck (2003) explains that school districts spend much more money on professional development than they think, and most of it is neither actively managed nor explicitly linked to professional development goals of the district. Forty to sixty percent of funds used to provide professional development are external, coming from federal sources, special program, and private funds. Hornbeck (2003) suggests that this has contributed to a fragmented professional development effort and lack of long range planning as funds often come with restrictions, directed toward specific goals and activities. He believes that districts should move away from organizing activities around funding sources and instead combine funding streams to support combined efforts focused on schools' needs. This reexamination would potentially shift professional development models to more cohesive formats.

This study examined factors that influenced professional development that teacher leaders, who received their own professional development, provided as well as the influences, supports that surfaced when doing so. This study helped fill the gap regarding models to provide embedded professional development for teachers.

### **Research Questions**

1. What did teacher leaders who received professional development through a University Literacy Center do as professional development providers in their schools?
2. What influences the professional activities they facilitated with the teachers in their schools?
3. What were the supports they encountered in doing so?

### **Theoretical Framework**

While the aim of this study was to examine the factors which affected professional development teacher leaders provides, it was essential to consider how the leaders determined the most effective approach to leading while working in the context. Ongoing, embedded professional development opportunities varied tremendously from the content to the context of the teachers involved in the process. Therefore, a leadership theory focused on a situational approach provided an appropriate framework for this study.

The Hersey-Blanchard Situational Theory, developed by Dr. Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard in the 1970's and referenced a multitude of times when studying effective leadership models, focuses on leaders changing their leadership styles as a result of the situations in which they are involved. In this case study, teacher leaders' styles varied depending on the causes and outcomes of the professional development sessions. According to the theory, instead of honing in on one leadership style, successful leaders adjust their efforts given the situation. More so, leaders take into consideration what needs to get done for the job to be completed successfully. Their approach to leading should place less emphasis on the task and more emphasis on the relationships with the people with whom they are working to succeed as leaders.

### **Methodology**

A case study (Creswell, 1998) was used to describe what influenced the professional development that teacher leaders provided in their schools. More specifically, a case study was used so that units of analysis in the "bounded system" were studied "over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context" (Creswell, 1998, p. 61). An inductive investigative strategy (Patton, 2008) was used to examine the factors, which affected the professional development teacher leaders provided. Inductive reasoning, often referred to as a bottom-up approach, is the process by which broader generalizations are derived from specific observations. Using an inductive approach was logical in this study since the broader concepts were determined as a result of the data collected.

### **Setting**

This case study was conducted in three public elementary schools located in a suburban community in New Jersey: Grant Primary School, Harrison Primary School, and McKinley Primary School in the Brewster School District (pseudonyms used for all school and participant names).

The district has been designated by the State Department of Education as a District Factor Group GH. This is a ranking system used for comparison of socioeconomic conditions of school districts in the state that range from A (lowest) to J (highest). The district enrolled 8,900 students during the 2010-11 school year; 93.4% of the students speak English as their first language. They are served from Pre-Kindergarten through twelfth grade in seven primary schools, two intermediate schools, one middle school and one high school.

### ***Background Information***

The district promotes and supports a strong commitment to professional development, demonstrated in part by the appointment and job description of their teacher leaders. While many New Jersey districts employ Reading Specialists, there is a tendency to use them *solely* as a resource for struggling literacy students, and rarely for teacher development. However, in this district, there is recognition of the importance of teacher leaders as a foundation and necessity for effective support and ongoing learning of the instructional staff (Searby & Shaddix, 2008; Stoelinga & Mangin, 2010; Wasley, 1991). Their reading specialists (known as Elementary Teaching Specialists, ETS) act as teacher leaders, spending a large amount of time as professional development providers to their colleagues, in addition to fulfilling their other job responsibilities such as coordinating state testing and overseeing resource and gifted programs.

The Brewster School District has been a partner with a University Literacy Center since its inception in 2007. The district sent one ETS from each of its eight elementary schools to each of the four meetings during the year of the study. Each ETS is a certified Reading Specialist who provides teacher support, conducts student assessment, coordinates state testing, and acts as a direct line of communication between teachers and school and district administrators.

### ***The Role of the Elementary Teaching Specialist***

Within the Brewster School District, the official ETS job description falls under the Educational/Teaching Personnel Department. In order to qualify for the position, a New Jersey Elementary Teaching Certification, Reading Specialist Certification, and Reading Recovery Certification is required. Three years are given to obtain the Reading Specialist Certification, if not previously earned at time of hire. The ETS reports directly to the building principal.

To gain an understanding of the purpose of the ETS position, it is relevant to describe the ETS role in relation to this study. The ETS is positioned as a teacher leader whose role is to work with teachers through professional development experiences. Ideally, the ETS's mission is to increase teacher quality and ultimately student achievement. The ETS works directly with the building principal, in consultation with the District Director of Basic Skills, subject area supervisors, and the Reading Recovery Teacher Leader. The ETS assists in the development, integration, and assessment of the K-5 literacy curriculum. Evaluation of the ETS is based on the performance of responsibilities identified in this position description.

### ***Participants***

Because I was not aiming to produce generalizations from my findings, but rather to discover what occurred in a particular setting, a purposeful sample was acceptable and appropriate. To select the participants through a purposeful sampling process (Merriam, 2009), I selected a district that was a member of a University Literacy Center and also has a formal, designated teacher leader role in their schools. Selecting participants from a school district that was a member of the literacy center was important because I was aware, to some degree, of what professional training the teacher leaders received. There were eight teachers with the teacher leader role in the selected district; the only district in the literacy center with a formal teacher leader role. From within this group, I selected three participants to achieve maximum variation with regard to the following characteristics: number of years each teacher leader had been a member of the Literacy Center, number of years in their current position, the number of Literacy Center meetings each attended, and in what capacity each teacher leader worked as a professional development provider in her building. I picked Luann who had more than fifteen years of experience as a teacher leader, Allison who had more than seven years as a teacher leader and a Mindy who had less than five years as a teacher leader. The principals interviewed were chosen by default, as they were the principals in the schools where each of the selected teacher leaders worked.

**Luann**

At the time data were collected for this study, Luann had been a teacher for thirty years, seventeen of which had been as an Elementary Teaching Specialist (ETS) serving in the role of teacher leader. Luann described her teacher leader role as one that is very complex.

**Allison**

At the time of this study, Allison had been teaching for thirteen years. She spent six years in the classroom and had been serving in the teacher leader role as an Elementary Teaching Specialist for seven and a half years.

**Mindy**

At the time of the study, Mindy had been teaching for ten years. She has been in the teacher leader role as an Elementary Teaching Specialist for the past four years.

**Data Collection Procedures**

This case study employed multiple data collection strategies--observations, interviews, and the collection of artifacts-- in an attempt to develop and provide a rich description of the professional development provided the teacher leaders. This was for the purpose of attempting to uncover the factors and styles that affected them.

**Observations**

In order to provide first hand, holistic accounts of the teacher leaders' professional development experiences, observations were used as a data source (Merriam, 2009). Observations of teacher leaders' professional development sessions occurred monthly, from November through April. Teacher leaders were observed in the following professional development sessions: grade level meetings, classroom modeling, and whole school professional development sessions, as these were three types of opportunities the teacher leaders facilitated most often. I sat in on the professional development sessions as an observer. The ten sessions were videotaped and field notes were recorded to provide both a highly descriptive account as well as a reflective component for each of the observations (Creswell, 1988; Merriam, 2009). Which sessions to observe were mutually agreed on by each teacher leader and me.

**Table 1. Luann's Professional Development Sessions**

	<b>Session 1</b>	<b>Session 2</b>	<b>Session 3</b>	<b>Session 4</b>
Date	Nov. 26, 2012	Dec. 19, 2013	Jan. 28, 2013	April 4, 2013
Grade Level	3-4	2	1	4
Topic	Reading Comprehension	Spelling Pilot Program	Argument Writing Guided Reading Science Curriculum	NJASK 4
Resources	Inquiry Circles in Action: Comprehension and Collaboration by Harvey Daniels & Stephanie Harvey	Spelling Connections Student and Teacher's Manual	Handouts for writing responses to reading Power point Curriculum guide	NJASK 4 Training Materials Brewster curriculum
Format	Large Group Meeting (combination of three schools)	Small group, grade level meeting	Small group, grade level meeting	In-Class Modeling

Luann and Mindy were observed in an after school joint meeting as represented in Table 1. Luann and Mindy presented a session on a comprehension strategy, *Using Inquiry Circles in the Classroom* for third and fourth-grade teachers. There were approximately 45 teachers in the session. Mr. Walton, Mindy's principal, was present. The second professional development session of Luann's that I observed was a second-grade meeting that addressed the new spelling program that was being piloted in two second grade classrooms. Luann used a discussion format to run the meeting.

The third professional development session was a first-grade team meeting that covered three topics: an argumentative writing revision, guided reading strategies, and ways to incorporate writing strategies the science classrooms. In the fourth observation, Luann modeled an in-class lesson for an Academically Independent (gifted) fourth-grade classroom. The topic was writing a composition as a response to a poem using a planning structure for the state assessment NJASK 4.

Allison was observed during three of the professional development sessions she provided. In the first session, Allison modeled a small-guided reading lesson, in her office, while the classroom teacher observed as is highlighted in Table 3. The observer was an ELL teacher who co-taught in a second-grade classroom, but did not have a literacy background. My second observation was where Allison facilitated a kindergarten team meeting where the focus was reading assessment and reader's response to text, which were topics included in the school's professional development plan. Her third professional development meeting was with four fourth grade teachers where Allison reviewed newly revised information for the state assessment (NJASK) of which the teachers were unaware.

Mindy was observed three times. In the first session, she co-presented with Luann as shown in Table 1. The second session's original plan was for Mindy to work one-on-one with a third grade ELL teacher who was new to being in the classroom full-time. However, another teacher also attended the meeting at the last minute, changing Mindy's plan to work with just one teacher, as noted in Table 2. The meeting focus was on the school's literacy assessment program, Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) with her goal to model how to score and analyze student work using the DRA and then use the data to inform instruction. The third observation was when Mindy worked with four first grade teachers on "anchoring" writing samples in preparation for the NJASK. This was planned as a working session where each teacher read and scored, using the district scoring rubric, anonymous student writing samples. This meeting stemmed from a district-wide initiative to include anchoring as a form of assessing standard-based writing samples.

**Table 2. Mindy's Professional Development Sessions**

	<b>Session 1</b>	<b>Session 2</b>	<b>Session 3</b>
Date	Nov. 26, 2012	Jan. 29, 2013	March 11, 2013
Grade Level	3-4	3	1
Topic	Reading Comprehension	Developmental Reading Assessment	Anchoring Writing Sample
Resources	Inquiry Circles in Action: Comprehension and Collaboration by Harvey Daniels and Stephanie Harvey	Words Their Way by Donald Bear & Marcia Invernizzi DRA materials and Teacher's Manual Powerpoint from previously attended training	Student Writing Samples 24-point district rubric
Form	Large Group Meeting (combination of three schools)	Small group (two teachers)	Small group, grade level meeting

**Interviews**

Interviews, shown in Appendices A and C, were conducted with the three teacher leaders and their respective principals. Appendix B shows interviews conducted with teacher leaders before and after each professional development session. Additionally, a research journal was used to take field notes in an effort to capture the responses and record the reactions and impressions that occurred during the interviews.

**Artifacts**

I collected all training documents that the teacher leaders provided to their colleagues for each professional development session. In order to understand the professional development sessions in depth, I asked each teacher leader to share her school's overall professional development plan. The school-wide professional development plan was a document outlining the professional growth goals throughout the year. It contained a mission and specific goals aimed at instructional achievement.

A professional development committee at the school level created the plan, with input from the district supervisors. Each teacher leader was a part of the committee and referred to it throughout the year when planning professional development opportunities.

**Table 3. Allison’s Professional Development Sessions**

	<b>Session 1</b>	<b>Session 2</b>	<b>Session 3</b>
Date	Dec. 6, 2012	Jan. 9, 2013	March 1, 2013
Grade Level	2	Kindergarten	4
Topic	Development Reading Assessment	Reading Assessment and Reader’s Response	NJASK Test Preparation
Resources	The Continuum of Literacy by Ilene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell Guided Reading Descriptors Graphic Organizers	Article from NJ.Com Materials from a Reader’s Workshop by Frank Serafini Kindergarten assessment and scoring rubrics	NJDOE Powerpoint Common Core State Standards NJASK 2012 Writing Samples Outside Professional Development Company Resources
Form	Demonstration Lesson	Small group, grade level meeting	Small group, grade level meeting

**Validity**

In the case of this study, teacher leader and building principal interviews, observations, and artifacts enabled me to look across different data sources to find consistencies and contradictions as a way to verify the trustworthiness of my findings. For instance, I observed that teacher leaders and principals shared the same view of the school's professional development culture. Secondly, rich and thick description of the findings (Creswell, 1998) served as a verification process in two ways. Keeping a research journal provided me with detailed observations, thoughts, and descriptions during the data collection and analysis period. Observation of the professional development sessions over a six-month period was a significant amount of time to document occurrences relevant to my research questions. The third strategy I employed to increase the credibility of my findings was member checking, which was done during the entire collection and analysis process to ensure correctness of information. I built a rapport with the interviewees in an effort to elicit honest responses. At the conclusion of each interview, I summarized their answers with each participant and subsequently shared preliminary analysis findings and asked for feedback.

**Data Analysis**

The first phase of data analysis consisted of reading and rereading the transcripts, viewing the video recorded professional development sessions, alongside my research journal to gain a sense of the data as a whole (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2009). Interview transcripts from teacher leaders and principals were compared and contrasted to professional development observations and artifacts in order to identify patterns dictated by the research questions. Analytic memos were also incorporated (Patton, 2001) to connect current literature to field collection samples in order to gain a deeper understanding of the findings. In order to form general headings across the data, codes were established inductively, which enabled me to identify emerging patterns and generalizations.

As a result, the more general codes looked at what shaped the professional development that teacher leaders provided. For example, a general code was the identification of the professional development needs. This helped me to answer the research questions, in part, pertaining to the supports the teacher leaders have in place. Through interviews and video recorded sessions of the way in which each teacher leader acted during their professional development sessions, I felt it necessary to move toward an examination of the teacher leader attributes. Since the need and resources were established, it was critical to analyze how the teacher leaders’ styles affected the professional development sessions.

## **Results**

The results from this study focused on describing what the teacher leaders did as professional development leaders in their schools and the primary factors that influenced this work. Not surprisingly, given their job description and general understandings of their role, all of the teacher leaders interviewed for this study, saw themselves as professional developers. However, all expressed that they often found themselves assuming many different kinds of responsibilities. Given that there were various duties associated with the position, the ability to remain flexible regarding the content and format of the professional development they provided and with whom they work was essential. The findings explored the various factors associated with teacher leaders' professional development experiences, which included: What they did as teacher leaders, what influenced their professional development activities and the supports and obstacles they faced when doing so.

### ***What do Teacher Leaders Do?***

Luann, Allison, and Mindy all provided similar descriptions of the role they played in their schools. Each stated their roles were professional development providers and teacher leaders. While how each spent her time varied from week to week, month to month, and even year to year, each viewed their primary purpose as helping teachers improve their ability to effectively implement the curriculum by providing professional development, as described in the district job description for their position.

They did this by meeting with teachers individually or in small groups when they saw a specific need or when teachers asked them for help. In addition, each teacher leader led weekly grade level meetings to address specific needs. The teacher leaders used the grade level meetings to share information from the district supervisors regarding the curriculum and district initiatives and policy changes. Each teacher leader structured these meetings in generally the same way, using a combination of presentation and discussion. The teacher leaders worked with teachers during one-hour monthly faculty meetings for which the Language Arts District Supervisor frequently dictated the topics.

The topics covered during the observed sessions were in response to district mandates, based on their own knowledge and professional learning experiences (including as a result of their participation in University Center meetings), or because they saw struggling teachers either they identified or who self-identified to implement some aspect of the curriculum. Out of the ten PD sessions I observed, six topics stemmed from district mandates; specifically, four related to the NJASK assessment, one focused on the district's reading assessment, and one pertained to the new spelling program, which was in its pilot stage. Two of the ten sessions were based on information teacher leaders brought back to their schools from attending sessions at the Center, and two sessions were a result of teachers requiring extra assistance, as identified by the teacher leader. Because the observations were scheduled at the convenience of the teacher leaders and me, it was not possible to see everything the teacher leaders provided. Luann, Allison, and Mindy confirmed that it was reasonably representative of the professional development they provided.

A description of the teacher leaders' professional development activities illustrated the long days they worked and the flexibility they needed to meet the diverse needs, settings, and topics to which they responded. Their work often began before the contractual start of the school day because this could sometimes be the only time available to meet and continued beyond the final bell. During this time, they primarily worked with teachers to meet their professional development needs, ranging from those driven by district mandates to those identified by the teachers themselves shown in Table 4. As one example, Luann began her day when she met with a novice first-grade teacher who was unfamiliar with writing prompts on the upcoming state standardized test. This informal meeting was in response to a professional development session Luann had facilitated the previous day. The novice teacher had additional questions and requested the follow-up meeting. Luann obliged; both agreed that before the start of the following school day would be best for both of their schedules.

A typical day consisted of five professional development activities, which the teacher leaders facilitated. Using Luann as an example, out of the five, two were in response to district mandates, two were in response to teacher requests related to district mandates, and one was in response to a request for assistance by the building principal regarding a state mandate. In this example, the four sessions covered topics related to EE4NJ, NJASK, The Common Core State Standards, and the new word study program, which accounted for eighty percent of her day.

The remaining twenty percent was designated to help a struggling teacher with a guided reading lesson, a required district approach. In terms of format, she facilitated two discussions, gave one presentation, participated in a collaborative working meeting, and modeled an instructional strategy. Table 4 indicates Luann never initiated the topics; rather, she was always provided professional development topics in response to others. While this day was specific to Luann's work context, Allison and Mindy reported similar schedules. In essence, the typical day for these teacher leaders consisted of delivering professional development focused on helping teachers effectively respond to state and district mandates, through regularly scheduled meetings and teacher initiated requests, delivered through presentations, modeling, and discussions.

**Table 4. Brewster Teacher Leader Professional Development Activities on A Typical Day**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Task</b>	<b>Reason</b>	<b>Audience</b>	<b>Activity/Format</b>	<b>Initiated PD?</b>
9:30 am	Introduce changes to the Word Study program that aligns with the CCSS	District response to adopting the CCSS	Third-grade team	Presentation and Discussion	District Language Arts Supervisor
11:15 am	Review the upcoming requirements for the pilot writing program	District response to adopting the CCSS	Fourth-grade team	Presentation	District Language Arts Supervisor
12:30 pm	Collaboratively plan a staff meeting to review the new teacher evaluation system (EE4NJ).	The principal needed the teacher leader's assistance.	Teacher leader and principal	Meeting	Building Principal
1:45 pm	Implement guided reading lessons	A novice teacher feels she is struggling to effectively implement guided reading lessons.	Second Grade novice teacher	Model guided reading lesson	Teacher

***Influences that Drive Teacher Leaders' Professional Development Sessions***

Multiple influences drove the professional development that teacher leaders provided. Sixty percent of the observed professional development offerings provided by the teacher leaders were driven by district mandates and state policy: the NJASK Assessment, the Common Core State Standards, and the newly introduced teacher evaluation system in the state, The Excellent Educators for New Jersey Program (EE4NJ). Communicating information about EE4NJ was urgent because the new evaluation system needed to be in place by the start of the subsequent school year. Given the tight timeline, professional development sessions on this topic were given higher priority than all others. District-directed curricular changes were another factor that significantly influenced the professional development which teacher leaders provided.

Less frequently, professional development opportunities were created as a result of teachers asking the teacher leaders for assistance as well as teacher leaders observing problematic instructional practices in teachers' classrooms. In only two observed professional development sessions, teacher leaders provided assistance as a result of a classroom (non-evaluative) observation). Both Lauren and Mindy had observed teachers who could use constructive feedback on the way they were implementing writer's workshop. As a result, both teacher leaders met with the teachers to discuss ways to improve.

The University Literacy Center was another impetus for professional development topic selection and activities in the Brewster District. When teacher leaders felt the information presented at meetings aligned with their district's curricular goals or were built on sound, evidence-based effective instructional strategies that they believed would be helpful to teachers, they turn-keyed the information to their colleagues in subsequent sessions. During a collaborative session, Luann and Mindy used resources from the University Literacy Center meeting with Harvey Daniels and his work with his comprehension strategy known as Inquiry Circles. Not a district mandate but the teacher leaders felt it was important information for their teachers to know.

Additionally, aligned with the district's new writing program, Mindy, Luann, and Allison each used Carl Anderson's resources (they received from a University Literacy Center meeting) throughout the year at grade level meetings. The data clearly illustrated how a large majority of the professional development was influenced by a top-down approach rather than organically created from teacher need.

### ***Supports for Teacher Leaders***

Availability of external resources was another important factor affecting the professional development teacher leaders provided. The data indicated that the two resources they most frequently drew upon were The University Literacy Center and each other.

**University Literacy Center:** All three teacher leaders reported that the professional development sessions they attended through the University Literacy Center were a source of ideas for professional development offerings at their schools that complemented, but were not planned to be directly responsive to district or state mandates and initiatives. During the year in which the data were collected and the previous year, Luann, Mindy, and Allison attended eight professional development sessions provided by the Center. Topics, resources, and information from three of the sessions were used in the observed teacher leaders' professional development offerings at their schools, while interview data showed more were used but not observed. The Center provided current, research-based professional development sessions from which the teacher leaders often planned subsequent learning opportunities for their teachers. As a result, their affiliation with The Center supported the teacher leaders' efforts to change instructional practice and their participation in The Center activities made a meaningful contribution to this process. The Center meetings were often the source of topics for specific professional development sessions when they were aligned with the school's professional development goals or added research-based support to a session that would have been presented anyway.

**Teacher Leader District Cohort:** In addition to the support and resources the Center provided to the teacher leaders, Luann Allison, and Mindy reported that they viewed their teacher leader colleagues as important resources. The Brewster District created context in which this could occur by making it a part of their job to attend monthly meetings for them with the Director of Language Arts. As a result, they had come to count on each other to generate ideas, get suggestions on how to deal with obstacles they experience, and create strategies to facilitate professional development. The "two heads are better than one" approach to these meetings allowed the teacher leaders to increase their knowledge and improve their abilities to provide professional development by incorporating observations, experiences, and feedback from their colleagues into their own practices. Equally beneficial were the cost savings realized by school districts when teacher leaders receive the time and resources to develop collaborative programs that maximized their capacity.

The teacher leaders reported that at these meetings they collaborated effectively to address agenda items that range from new curricular issues to preparation for state testing. For example, Mindy reported, "The ETSS rely on each other. I've been doing this for four years and I've been in the district for ten. There are certainly people that have been around a lot longer than I have, so I am constantly going back and forth with them with ideas. I am lucky that I have them. Meeting with the other ETSS is a huge influence on me and my work as a professional development provider."

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations inherent to this study. This first was the realization that the sample only included three teacher leaders; meaning, it was difficult to make wider generalizations. Since Brewster was the only district (as a University Literacy Center member) that designated a teacher leader role whose primary responsibility was to provide professional development, the information was difficult to generalize to a larger population that may not necessarily utilize a teacher leader in a similar fashion.

Second, I was limited in the number of professional development sessions I was able to observe because I was not working in the district. Having to rely on the teacher leaders to coordinate times to record the professional development sessions with me excluded me from potential sessions that could have strengthened my data collection and analysis procedures. To that end, a third limitation was that the sessions I was able to attend were not random but chosen by the teachers.

## **Discussion**

Although this study set out to uncover the universe of possibilities related to what teacher leaders do, what influences the professional development created and driven by teacher leaders, the reality was that much of what they do was determined for them. First, the teacher leaders in this study had a clear job description and little leeway with the topics they focused on. They spent a majority of their time as professional developers delivering information and supporting teachers in response to state and district mandates and curricular requirements. Based on their perspectives and experiences as teachers themselves, the Brewster teacher leaders were well situated to understand other teachers' needs. Furthermore, these teacher leaders possessed extensive content area knowledge (in this case regarding Language Arts Literacy) and experience that informed and enhanced the professional development and training work they do. As such, teacher leaders functioned as key drivers in the Brewster School District working toward maximizing teacher quality and effectiveness and creating improved learning environments for students.

Using teacher leaders as expert educators to transmit knowledge to other teachers was one way to provide professional development. However, researchers suggest that a more constructivist and reflective learning approach would help teachers truly learn, change, and improve instructional practice (Fullan, 2006). It is important to examine the teacher leader phenomena as it directly relates to their roles as professional development providers. This role could be a powerful impetus for learning experiences that take a "knowledge in practice" (Cochran- Smyth & Lytle, 1999) approach to inquiry and reflection, an approach that generates new knowledge and encourages improved practice through long-term and substantive change. If teacher leaders' roles were constructed more as a facilitator of learning than an expert transmitter of information, this has implications for The Center and the way it addresses teacher (leaders') professional development needs.

Second, the teacher leaders were able to draw their internal and external resources, as well as their relationships with colleagues, which affected their role as professional development providers. The teacher leaders' affiliation with The Center provided them the resources to create and support research-based professional development sessions in an effort to improve teachers' instructional practices as well as contribute to their drive to be lifelong learners. Because the Center functioned as a network of teachers across the state, it provided access to expert knowledge that otherwise may not have been available within an individual district (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Third, the relationships nurtured by the teacher leaders with building principals, teachers, and other teacher leaders were key to their work as professional development providers. The value of these relationships was affirmed by Fullan (1995) who suggested that collegial relationships help grow and cultivate a positive school culture by moving towards establishing a community of learners. Researchers commonly define teacher leaders as those individuals who have the ability and commitment to contribute to their educational communities in ways that extend beyond each individual's classroom (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2008) to "influence others toward improved educational practice" (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001, pg. 88) through meaningful relationships.

## **Recommendations**

The findings from this study have implications specifically for The Center and Brewster School District administrative leaders and other districts who employ teacher leaders to help teachers improve instructional practice.

*University-based centers should Relate PD to State Mandates and Initiatives.* Given that the majority of professional development activities the teacher leaders offered was related to school, district, and state mandates, future planning of professional development for teacher leaders should be framed explicitly around implementing research-based topics that are related to current state mandates and initiatives. This study highlighted that a university-based literacy center can be an important resource for teacher leaders who plan professional development sessions in response to mandates as well as the practical experiences and recommendations by teachers in the field.

*The Importance of Internal Resources.* Teacher leaders need an array of skills to successfully help improve teachers' practices. These are in addition to having content knowledge, intellectual curiosity, and the ability to effectively turnkey information. Therefore, in addition to offering content-rich learning experiences, *University-based Centers* should provide sessions that help teacher leaders become better facilitators of learning.

In addition to content, meetings can incorporate strategies that deal with building trust, buy-in, and cooperation for teacher leaders to utilize in their work. Topics that help teacher leaders create clear visions for facilitating instructional change seem likely to benefit both the center and the teacher leaders' PD work in their schools.

*Change the Professional Development Format.* Another way in which *University-basedCenters* could help teacher leaders develop their skills while it helps deepen content knowledge is in the area of learning formats. The Center generally used a transmission model of professional development. Basically, the teacher leaders were receivers of information. Noted throughout the study was the way the teacher leaders used this same format for the professional development they offered. While this model of learning yielded certain benefit, such as teachers gaining research-based content knowledge that had been proven to be effective, teacher leaders seemed more likely to have a deeper impact on practice if they used a more collaborative and constructivist approach to professional development.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined what the shaping factors were of professional development that was implemented by three teacher leaders in a particular school district that designates a staff member to this position in every school. I assumed, in designing the study, that it would deepen understanding of how an affiliation with The University Center influenced their work, but it also gave me a broader and more comprehensive view of the factors that shape the enactment of their roles.

Although this study set out to uncover the universe of possibilities related to what influences the professional development created and driven by teacher leaders, the reality is that much of what they did was determined for them. The teacher leaders had a clear job description and little leeway on the topics they focused on. Their path for doing so was relatively smooth because the Brewster district enacted much of what is known about creating a context in which teacher leaders could function successfully in their school settings. Drawing on their internal and external resources it was apparent Brewster is a place where teacher leaders can succeed as professional development providers.

With information about how teacher leaders positioned as professional development providers function, schools may be more able to implement effective approaches to supporting teacher leaders. Furthermore, this study provided recommendations for University Literacy Centers in an effort to create successful partnerships with districts. Universities and schools willing to take advantage of what teacher leaders can offer are in a unique position to empower educators to view themselves as learners leading to increased capacity and resulting in increased student achievement

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## **Appendix A**

### **Teacher Leader Interview Guide**

- 1) Please state your job title and description?
  - a. Tell me about your job as it relates to teacher training and professional development
  - b. What percentage of your position do you think accounts for this?
- 2) How long have you been in your position?
- 3) Describe 3-4 specific professional development sessions that you provided in your school either this year or in the past?
  - a. How did they come to be?
  - b. What did you do and why?
- 4) Describe the culture of your school re: PD?
  - a. Explain how teachers feel when PD is presented? Describe what you see when you go into the teacher's classrooms, in small group meetings and whole school professional development sessions.
- 5) What if you had a teacher struggling with a teaching practice? Explain the process you may follow to help him/her
- 6) What would I see as an observer one of your staff meetings?
- 7) Describe how you determine if a teacher or team of teachers needs specific help with a certain teaching/management area- can you cite a specific example?
- 8) Tell me how you would handle a resistant teacher/novice/struggling teacher?
- 9) Can you describe some factors that challenge your delivery of teacher training? Can you cite specific examples? Are there resources that you can go to help overcome these challenges?
- 10) Explain your "go-to" resources
  - a. Tell me about how outside resources have influenced the way you provide teacher training/PD.

## **Appendix B**

### **Pre/Post-Professional Development Interview Guide**

#### **Pre Interview**

1. What will I see when I observe you on \_\_\_\_\_?
2. Tell me how you came to provide professional development on this topic
3. Tell me what resources helped you form/guide the session

#### **Post Interview**

1. How did you feel about the session
2. Tell me how any challenges may have hindered the session
3. Tell me how any supports may have helped the session

## **Appendix C**

### **Principal Interview Guide**

- 1) Please state your job title and description
- 2) How long have you been in your position?
- 3) Please explain the way that professional development by teacher leaders is run in your school.
- 4) Please explain the culture of professional development in your school.
- 5) Please explain who runs the professional development sessions.
- 6) Can you let me know what role teacher leaders play in how the professional development sessions are created; as in, who determines topics? Audience? The length of time and number of sessions?
- 7) Can you explain if and/or what professional development is mandated by outside agencies other than your school; ie, district, state agencies, federal government?
- 8) Can you explain the teacher leaders' role in planning and implementing professional development?
- 9) Can you tell me about a specific professional development session that you attended that was provided by a teacher leader? What were some of the strengths? Challenges?
- 10) Regarding the specific professional development session you told me about, how did you support the success or help overcome the challenge? Or both?
- 11) Can you let me know about challenges that you see standing in the way of your school's professional development that is provided by teacher leaders?
- 12) How do you handle a situation if the teacher leader comes to you with an issue regarding a resistant teacher not accepting or moving forward after professional development sessions?
- 13) Can you explain ways in which you support the teacher leader in her role as professional development provider?
- 14) How do teacher leaders delivery of professional development impact or enhance your efforts as an instructional leader?