
Teacher leadership development from novice to veteran years: Reflections and observations of teachers and school managers.

Yasmeen Malik

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Gugulesizwe High School

Abstract

The call for teacher leadership is explicitly embedded within South African educational policies, and amidst an ever-increasing educational crisis, effective teacher leadership development has never been more urgent. Drawing from leader self-development theory, roles of teacher leaders, and servant leadership theory, this study aimed to explore how teacher leaders and school management team members understood and experienced teacher leadership development. The purpose of the study was to determine what lessons could be learnt on how ordinary teachers could be developed into effective leaders. Using a qualitative case study design, data was generated through semi-structured individual interviews with two effective teacher leaders and two school management team members from a secondary school in the eThekweni region of KwaZulu-Natal. The interview data was supplemented with reflective journal entries and analysed using thematic analysis. Findings suggested that while opportunities for teacher leadership development presented themselves within and beyond the school to all teachers, what sets effective teacher leaders apart from ordinary or reluctant teachers is their positive response to opportunities and initiative for leadership development. Aspiring teacher leaders who seek to acquire leadership skills should consciously take responsibility and take the initiative for their own development and leadership learning, engage in deep reflection and critique, and constantly strive to improve their practices. If teachers are willing to use what they have to initiate and nurture their development, while looking upon situations as growth opportunities, then teacher leadership development becomes a possibility, even in challenging contexts.

Introduction and background

Teacher leadership (TL) proponents argue that although “heroic leadership approaches, positioning the principal as the sole leader of the school, have long been influential in the literature” (Bellibaş et al., 2020, p. 12), the present era demands a more collective leadership. Consequently, TL has been gaining popularity in recent decades (Sawalhi & Chaaban, 2022), as it is perceived as a shared leadership model which affords fruitful opportunities to improve teaching and learning to staff at every level of leadership (Harris & Lambert, 2003; Hunzicker, 2022; Sterrett, 2022). TL is critical in influencing students and teachers towards positive academic outcomes, leading to enhanced quality of education and school improvement (Ngo et al., 2022). Given the contextual challenges of schools in South African schools, which calls

for the effective leadership of teachers in all spheres of schools, this study adopted Katzenmeyer and Moller's (2009, p. 6) conceptualisation of TL, which states that: "Teacher leaders lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders, influence others toward improved education practice and accept responsibility for achieving the outcomes of their leadership."

In addition, the study conceptualised TL as a stance (Smulyan, 2016), a way of being and doing (Hunzicker, 2017), which is intentional (Hunzicker, 2022). *Leader development* refers to individual-level development, influenced by internal factors (knowledge, abilities and skills) and external factors (eg. workshops, training) (Day, 2000; Reichard & Johnson, 2011). In contrast, *leadership development* refers to the human development process involving everyone in an organisation (interactions and relationships between leaders and followers, influenced by social and contextual factors). *Teacher leadership* "can be defined as an action-oriented, collaborative process through which effective teachers positively influence student learning and well-being beyond one classroom" (Hunzicker, 2022, n.p.)

Historically, the South African education system was characterised by a rigidly hierarchical and bureaucratic, top-down chain of command. This resulted in teachers assuming a very passive and dependent role, as decisions were made on their behalf (Grant, 2017). Since 1994, teachers have been expected to "graduate" from follower to leader roles. Consequently, constitutional statutes and policies that promote TL were introduced. Consequently, the South African Schools Act of 1996 (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996) promotes the internal distribution of power to teachers, while the Norms and Standards for Educators (RSA, 2011) require a teacher to fulfil the role of a leader, administrator, and manager. The National Education Policy Act of 1996 (RSA, 2000) and the Employment of Educators Act [EoEA] of 1998 (RSA, 1998), encompassed in the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) document (Department of Education, 2003), have gazetted several TL responsibilities. For instance, the [EoEA] of 1998 (RSA, 1998) expects teachers to demonstrate well-developed leadership qualities, take initiative, be decisive and dependable, exert a positive influence on others while having a keen insight on educational matters.

However, despite an enabling policy framework, the poor performance of most South African public schools shows a dire need for effective leadership. Spaul (2013) reports inequalities in educational outcomes, failing literacy and numeracy levels in the lower grades, and several learning deficiencies. Additionally, Chikoko et al. (2015), Christie et al. (2010) and Qwabe et al. (2022) observe that South African schools are characterised by dysfunctionality, poor school conditions, lack of material and human resources, a decaying school culture, teacher shortages, absenteeism, violence, and disciplinary problems. Significantly, Murphy and Johnson (2011, p. 460) argue that "there is a dearth of research on leaders' development activities or leader effectiveness" while Sanocki (2013, p. 8) argues that "there is a void in the literature that details the process (progression/evolution) of teachers to teacher leaders". Likewise, Poekert et al. (2016, p. 309), report that the "extant literatures acknowledged the need for, and difficulty in, acquiring an understanding of how individual teachers engage in the developmental process associated with leadership knowledge, skills and dispositions".

Given these gaps in the literature, this study sought to understand how TL develops, and addressed the following research questions: a) What are teacher leaders' and selected SMT

members' understandings of what teacher leaders do? b) How do teacher leaders and selected SMT members explain the development of TL? c) What can be learnt from teacher leaders and selected SMT members about how other teachers can become teacher leaders? These questions aimed to shed light on the leadership development process of novice to veteran teachers, while illuminating the dynamics of informal leadership of the two Post Level One teachers (teacher perspectives) and two members of the SMT (management perspectives) in one South African school. Harris and Kuhnert (2008) assert that if positive triggers of the initial stages of TL development could be understood, schools would be better able to provide growth opportunities that challenge teachers to progress to higher levels of leadership development. This study therefore sought to identify such positive triggers and processes that nurtured TL development as a whole.

Methodology

This qualitative case study conducted within an interpretive paradigm focused on extracting rich, verbal data from a small sample of participants (Cohen et al., 2018) to ensure an “intense investigation of particular individuals” and their “particular situations” (Lindegger, 1999, p. 255). Furthermore, Merriam (1998) asserts that qualitative case studies pride themselves on the richness, uniqueness, and specificity of data. Yin (2009, p. 23) asserts that a case study is “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context and Hallinger (2018) emphasises that the route school leaders traverse on their leadership journey is context driven. Given that the context of each school influences its teachers' leadership practices and development (Hallinger, 2018), I chose to focus on only two teacher leaders and two school management team (SMT) members at one school. Thus, within the phenomenon of teacher leadership, the case was of two teacher leaders' development from their novice to veteran years through their perspectives and those of the SMT members that supported and observed their development at Sunflower High.

Selection procedure of school and participants

I purposively (Cohen et al., 2018) selected a particular school circuit in KwaZulu-Natal on the basis of its reputation for the effective leadership and consistently high academic achievement. The circuit manager, whom I believed to be sufficiently information-rich (Creswell, 2012) to direct me to an appropriate school for this study, assisted me in selecting one well-led, well-performing school, based on his knowledge of the schools under his management. He directed me to Sunflower High (pseudonym), a secondary school characterised by consistent high performance in the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations, and which he believed had effective principal and teacher leadership. NSC results were considered a valid performance indicator, as they constitute an exit qualification that functions as “a benchmark for tertiary education” (Mouton et al., 2012, p. 1211), and form the basis upon which overall school performance is analysed in South Africa (Mtshali et al., 2022). Principals are key identifiers of excellent teachers, owing to their monitoring of teachers' appraisals, term results, development and interactions with staff (Vallance, 2003). I therefore asked the principal to identify two effective teacher leaders who were full-time classroom teachers yet took on extra responsibilities for school improvement beyond the usual classroom responsibilities and were observed as having developed in leadership over the years (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009).

Malik: Leadership development of teachers

The school principal introduced me to two of his most effective and agentic teacher leaders, Sasha and Samuel. Given that their development into excellent teacher leaders was observed by their principal, I expected them to be information-rich participants (Creswell, 2012) who could explain the process of leadership development. I then asked Sasha and Samuel each to suggest to me the name of an SMT member whom they believed had observed their leadership development and supported them over the years. SMT members were included in order to establish an understanding of the SMT interactions, behaviours, support and other efforts that nurtured the development of TL. SMT members were selected as they were information-rich (Creswell, 2012) and could strengthen the credibility of the study by validating the teacher leaders' expressions of their experiences, struggles and successes against those of their respective, supportive SMT members (Creswell, 2012).

Context and background of school and participants

Sunflower High was located in a medium-income suburb in KwaZulu-Natal, and was a fee-paying, Quintile 5 school, meaning that all learners had to pay fees and that the school received minimal financial support from the Department of Basic Education (DoE). In reality, only 10% of the learners paid school fees as many were exempted from paying fees because their family income was below a certain threshold, resulting in the school struggling to cover its expenses. Teachers at Sunflower High therefore worked under extreme pressure, owing to a lack of funding for the necessary classroom resources.

Sasha, a 57-year-old Post Level 1 English teacher with 33 years' teaching experience, assisted in managing Sunflower High's Languages Department. Sasha's supportive SMT colleague, 56-year-old Ms Sonia, was the deputy principal of the school and had 33 years' teaching experience. Samuel, a 51-year-old Post Level 1 Accounting teacher with 30 years' experience, assisted the school in managing the Commerce Department as the school did not have a Department Head for Commerce. Both Sasha and Samuel had volunteered to manage their departments. They did not receive remuneration from the DoE or have any offices allocated for conducting their management work. Samuel's supporter over the years was the 61-year-old principal, Mr Shah, who had 41 years' teaching and management experience. Mr Shah taught a few English lessons to Grade 12 learners, as did the deputy principal, Ms. Sonia.

Data analysis procedure

Data was generated through several semi-structured interviews with each of the four participants which lasted from 2 to 4 hours each. These were recorded, transcribed, and then analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During thematic analysis, the data sets were read and re-read, themes were identified and coded. Data was categorically placed below the codes which were in the form of keywords or phrases. It was ensured that the data spoke to the research questions directly, coherence with the research questions were found and finally, working themes were refined to permanent ones. Robust quotes that vividly captured the analytical points of thematic discussion were extracted and analysed to expound the themes and understand the data as a whole. (Braun and Clarke, 2006). To supplement the results, asked Sasha and Samuel were asked to record their critical thoughts about their leadership development journeys in reflective journals and provide artefacts in the form of photographs of anything that, in their view, represented their essential TL development over the years. These

became points of deeper analysis through the interview process. Standard ethical procedures in relation to consent and confidentiality were ensured.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

The theoretical framework for this study comprised of three aspects: Reichard and Johnson's (2011) multilevel model of leader self-development, which theorises leadership development as a holistic process of self-development that occurs as a process within the school with other role-players, structures, material resources and processes; Harrison and Killion's (2007) ten roles of teacher leaders, which facilitated a better understanding of the work teachers do; and Greenleaf's (1977, 1996, 1998) servant leadership theory, which explains the dynamics of being an informal leader without a formal position of leadership and authority, as experienced by the teacher leaders in this study.

Findings and discussion

The novice years: The beginning of the leadership journey

Sasha and Samuel's dynamic leadership journey at Sunflower High was a gradual, worthy one, and became an eventful and enriching experience. However, the beginning of this journey was about surviving, facing challenges, and developing their skills and expertise as novices. Certain trigger events, some positive and some challenging, formed the foundation of their future development as teacher leaders.

Samuel described the most salient life-changing events that had triggered his leadership development:

The principal tasked me to do the pupils' summary attendance register for the whole school... I was thrown into the deep end with being union leader...on timetabling committee in my 2nd year of teaching and doing admin work at the school. That also developed me ... I started seeing things from a union perspective... helped me a lot in terms of negotiation and conflict resolution, management ... my mark-book, which was taken on a roadshow by my subject advisor.... earned me some recognition....

Sasha reminisced over how her ethics and professionalism developed at her previous school helped her to survive unstable periods at Sunflower High and develop further:

At my first school, the foundational work ethic was already instilled in me by my principal...he kept me on my toes! ... checked that marking was done ... lesson plans prepared and good ... No spelling mistakes on the board, I had to go the extra mile! This school was a different kettle of fish ... shaky management ... no Department Head so no instruction and heavy workloads ... dropping learner numbers ... no guidance. I had to now bring the work ethics from the previous school, without anybody instructing or guiding me here. Over the years, I developed further.

Malik: Leadership development of teachers

In her reflective journal, Sasha's strong will and deep feelings about her work surfaced clearly:

Ours is a noble profession and if we see it like that, we will live up to it! Shaping young minds, you see the gravity of the responsibility, then you live up to it. To touch, inspire.

An unstable, unsupportive management structure was clearly intimidating to Sasha as a novice teacher. However, she viewed the challenges she encountered as opportunities to strengthen her resilience and drew deeply on the ethics and professionalism previously instilled in her which developed her leadership further.

Tait (2008) acknowledges that the novice years are a period of struggle for teachers. However, Kraft and Falken (2020) believe that TL development is nurtured as novice teachers make mistakes and gain experience. Avolio (2011) asserts that it is not the triggers to development that are important, but rather being prepared and enthusiastic about learning from such triggers. Accordingly, Sasha and Samuel responded positively to foundational leadership development triggers and showed a readiness and enthusiasm to learn and develop. The challenges they faced were in fact authentic, real-life growth opportunities that triggered "coping strategies, emotional competence, reframing skills, and other resilient behaviour and ways of thinking" (Tait, 2008, p. 71). Therefore, TL is a mechanism that provides authentic learning experiences, helping teachers to overcome barriers to effective teaching and learning (Andrews & Crowther, 2006). As suggested by Harrison and Lembeck (1996), teacher leaders use their agency, and their knowledge of the school and district, to improve their schools and institute change, rendering teaching a fulfilling profession (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Sasha and Samuel's 'present-day' roles and achievements

Sasha and Samuel's achievements and current roles and responsibilities at Sunflower High were extensive and impressive, highlighting years of hard work and dedication.

Samuel said:

I have been a Cluster Co-ordinator for Accounting, a matric marker for 15 years and a senior marker for the last eight years... on the School Governing Body ... internal auditor ... sports committee chair ... co-ordinate all sports activities of the school, relief tally master...the Disciplinary conflict resolution processes fundraising initiatives ...Finance Committee.

In addition, Samuel followed his passion for Theology by leading and inspiring his community as a church pastor and achieving a degree in the subject:

I am also the Deputy Principal of our Bible School. I do much church-related stuff ... preaching ... lecturing ... coaching the youth ... conducting Bible graduations ... offering free tuitions to matriculants at the church

Mr Shah, Sunflower High's principal and Samuel's mentor, explained that Samuel's leadership development was attributed to his skills, dedication and eagerness to learn new things:

SAJELM 3 (1)

He undertakes executive management level duties better than some of my management staff ... does much more than a Department Head does ... serving the SGB [School Governing Body] forever! and his timetabling skills benefited our school for years.

On his role in Samuel's development, Mr Shah observed:

I roped him in on numerous occasions, but I think that I brought that out of him, to take on more responsibilities ... he was always willing to venture into new things and learn.

Sasha explained her present-day roles and responsibilities as follows:

We do not have a Department Head, so I am helping there. I am a Grade Co-Ordinator ... provide guidance, notes, resources to the teachers in that grade ... Senior Marker at the NSC Marking centre. A Cluster Co-ordinator ... as Union Site Steward I initiated the library project I do fundraising too.

Sasha's work and social network spread deep into the community.

I took a troupe of learners who did fusion dance to the United Nations and even to Switzerland. Tomorrow I will be on a radio programme ... securing funds ... it is how I get help for our school...working closely with a few tertiary institutions... assisting in Matric re-writes.

Ms Sonia, the Deputy Principal and Sasha's mentor, provided a highly positive assessment of Sasha.

She does not leave you to flounder, no... Excellent at management of her teachers. She is consistent and goes the extra mile even with new teachers, develops them ... she takes decisions on a school level. She is strict but fair. She watches what is happening reminds me of meetings, deadlines! She is dynamic!

Sasha and Samuel's leadership influence was clear. By taking on various responsibilities, they were successful in increasing their leader influence threshold (Aris, 2021). Huang (2016) describes this scenario as private TL influence becoming public. Interestingly, Crowther et al. (2002) and Andrews and Crowther (2006) add that this necessary movement into community leadership improves the quality of both the school and the community, showing how teaching has the power to improve communities. The expansion of Sasha and Samuel's TL into their communities challenged Grant's (2006, 2008, 2012) finding that TL in South Africa is restricted to classrooms and schools and resonated strongly with Harrison and Killion's (2007) proposal that teacher leaders become school leaders. As servant leaders, the teacher leaders nurtured "professional learning opportunities" (Crippen & Willows, 2019, p. 175), thereby operationalising the community-building trait of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2003).

Thus, for successful leadership development, teacher leaders ought to ensure the effective functioning of schools as a whole, so that classrooms become spaces conducive to teaching and learning.

Malik: Leadership development of teachers

Enablers along the leadership journey

Several factors had played a crucial role in nurturing Sasha and Samuel's transformation into extraordinary teacher leaders, including the classroom context, the collegial circle, and the broader school environment.

The classroom context

Sasha and Samuel reported that the disadvantaged context from which their learners came resulted in a need for learner counselling, and they tried to meet that need. Samuel said:

... learners find it easy to come to me and discuss matters that disturb them. Learners recognise the person's ability and they come for help ... rough backgrounds ... do not even know their fathers... do not have that fatherly figure ... we have to be their parents.

Similarly, Sasha felt the need to act as a parent to her learners at times. More importantly, she asserted that her learners had developed her:

... they 'have' developed me ... to look for ways to get the message across and they have made me search for new, innovative ways ... Them being English second language learners made me work harder! Learners will meet me years after schooling, and tell me: "Mam, you opened my eyes ...

In Sasha's journal, she indicated that within the busy and stressful teaching profession, teachers ought to liberate themselves and seek their own unique teaching style:

Thank God I was allowed the freedom to develop my unique teaching style. Even in a profession defined by rigid timetables, record keeping etc. ... a teacher has to find out what best works for her...

A very confident Sasha reported how introspective practices had helped her to connect with her learners on a deeper level:

I now see myself as a strong person who knows herself, clear about my goals which informs my actions ... constantly learning ... I went on to read Barack Obama's autobiography and Dalai Lama books on spirituality. Through this, I know people around me better now ... I can teach better now.

Essentially, these findings reflect that TL development starts in the classroom with learners, where classroom leadership and management skills crucial to the task of teaching are developed (Warren, 2021). Both Sasha and Samuel demonstrated an insistence in developing their classroom leadership skills, corroborated by Fairman and MacKenzie (2012), who found that teacher leaders' informal leadership is significantly triggered by teaching needs arising from the classroom context, and that teacher leaders initiate their own learning with the primary aim of improving teaching, learning, and learner achievement. Likewise, Kho et al. (2015) found that teacher leaders' roles positively influence their competencies and commitment, spurring them to expand their classroom leader roles to school-wide leader roles.

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 The collegial circle as an enabler

Samuel remembered how he had absorbed knowledge, skills, and teaching expertise from his more experienced colleagues:

... you start liaising, interacting with and learning from knowledgeable peers, networking ... They broaden your perspective of looking at things

Sasha talked of how she had in fact been developed by Samuel:

Like Mr ... [Samuel] he gets things done quietly, he does not take credit or look for attention. I learnt computers from him. He just gets it done ... he taught me assertiveness and negotiation skills.

Samuel added that open communication between management and teaching staff had nurtured his development as a leader:

Here teachers are free to interact with management and the principal always encourages that. Like I am part of the various committees and the SMT will come to me and ask me, what do you think about this?

Samuel insisted that a supportive school environment had made him feel safe and comfortable:

We have a very family-oriented relationship among the teachers. We have our problems but what makes it nice is after that we still a family.

Mr Shah, the principal, mirrored Samuel's words:

We often refer to our school as the family, there is a sense of working together, looking out for each other ...

Observing proactive and progressive colleagues had motivated Sasha, and enabled her actions and learning:

I get a lot of support from other colleagues too ... a younger colleague, who helps download papers for me. It motivates you when they are willing to help, and you learn from them.

Being an informal leader and having Ms Sonia's support seemed to have given Sasha more freedom and ease to undertake her responsibilities. She described her bold transformation clearly:

She has become much more confident now because she does not have to deal with other undesirable people now because I am here ... She knows she is in a team ... she does not hesitate; she is bold and assertive.

Sasha was not particularly impressed by her previous HOD, who "did what she had to do in class and that was it". However, she greatly appreciated the efficacy and agency on the part of Ms Sonia, which had motivated and enabled her development:

Malik: Leadership development of teachers

My current Deputy is an amazing woman, she is quick... sharp. She can do anything, excellent paperwork too. You have a woman who is innovative ... immediately sources out a sponsor! She motivates me by just being efficient.

Ms Sonia described her own proactive stance, revealing the ‘pull’ factors that had attracted Sasha to her:

I am prepared to venture out of the box, and I think that is what she appreciates. I have out of the box strategies I use with the principal, he accepts it. I think teachers appreciate that.

Sasha and Samuel’s development within their collegial circles validates Katzenmeyer and Moller’s (2011) finding that teacher leaders are reservoirs of skills and expertise, and Fang’s (2021) finding that the collegial circle is therefore an effective conduit that can influence TL development. The findings also show that TL development involves the early collection and later dissemination of knowledge and skills (Smulyan, 2016), where influence increases with time (Hunzicker, 2017).

The finding that various interactions and processes within the collegial circle support TL development is consistent with Reichard and Johnson’s (2011) view that various stakeholders’ roles, processes, interactions, support, training and recognition work together in leader self-development, which advances whole school development.

Findings revealed that management members who are equally enthusiastic about leadership development, such as Mr Shah and Ms Sonia, share their knowledge, skills and expertise in management, planning and curriculum matters and become efficient human resources (Harrison & Killion, 2007). In addition, Sasha and Samuel’s collaborative work promoted tolerance, acceptance and appreciation of individual differences, which Greenleaf (2003) describes as salient characteristics of servant leadership. Service to the school became a priority, and Sasha and Samuel worked tirelessly towards school improvement. Like servant leaders, they were committed to the growth of their colleagues while they developed themselves, thus demonstrating the community-building attribute of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2003; Spears, 2010).

Enabling opportunities within the school

Samuel believed that his proactive participation in school projects had nurtured his leadership development, providing multiple examples of willingness for teacher agency and thereby directing his professional growth both constructively and purposefully. His proactive participation in school committees and with administrative work had broadened his understanding of the schooling system, and he therefore advised others to do the same:

I feel that if you get involved in different things every new year, it broadens your knowledge ... they started me in different kinds of admin work ... I understood the entire working of the school.

SAJELM 3 (1)

Samuel revealed that he was unwilling to trade the respect and trust he had built up in his position as an informal teacher leader at Sunflower High for a formal, promotion post elsewhere:

That is why I do not want to leave here because I have built such a good relationship of trust and respect here and I think that is more important than any promotion in any other school.

Given that Samuel had developed a comprehensive portfolio during his leadership journey, I sought to understand to what extent his duties had been delegated to him and to what extent they were a product of his own initiative. He responded as follows:

In some cases, I volunteered because nobody else wanted to. In some cases, they requested me. In other cases, I volunteered because I wanted it for my future, for my development.

Mr Shah reported that it was in fact Samuel's set of expert skills and his insistence on never refusing an opportunity that had motivated school management to select him over others:

Sometimes I may forget. I rope him into a portfolio ... he would say ask others ... I do not want to come across as if I am hogging the limelight or taking on the projects. But when others do not want to volunteer, put their hands up to take his portfolio, he continues serving.

Samuel saw the benefit of participating in the workshops organised by the DoE:

... content workshops are run by subject advisor and ... we can brainstorm, discuss all these new things... the subject advisor shares knowledge and then the senior teachers start sharing ... At the cluster sessions, marking centre, there is ample time for discussion.

Mr Shah's healthy, professional relationship with the teachers was a factor that contributed to nurturing TL development. He expressed great interest in the welfare of the school, his teachers and himself, and he felt that his professional behaviour was crucial in this regard:

I have been principled about my relationship with my staff. I interact very well with them. I do not socialise or interact on social media or personally ... I must maintain that professional distance because if that gets back to the staff, it will not be good, they may think I favour him. However, I will go out of my way to help to ensure everything is right in the end. I will attend to late coming myself so that my Department Heads can teach.

Sasha revealed radical changes that had occurred in her leadership journey, where challenges had become stepping-stones. She chuckled as she exclaimed that having no Department Head [DH] had allowed her to spread her leadership wings in her department:

Malik: Leadership development of teachers

Without a DH I thought I would be dead but actually it freed me ... I felt more liberated. I could be creative, bring ideas in ... I just blossomed! I did not know I had the

capability to do so. I felt free to do things. Even when I was chosen as Senior Marker, I was dead scared but that again was a situation where I just blossomed! I helped them, guided them. I realised that this is where I shined, in mentoring. Like when I was thrust into managing the department at school? I learnt that I work well as a manager, a mentor.

Both the teacher leaders elaborated on the transparency, fairness and trust between management and teachers at Sunflower High, and the principal's enthusiasm in inviting teacher participation in school projects and accepting decisions on a school-wide level. Sasha said:

There is openness in this school. Ms Sonia will ask me if I know this, and she will teach me how to do it ... I have quite a lot of faith in the principal, I can trust him because you get some shady principals who are doing wrong things and then with our principal, he is by the book, he does everything to the T, legally, very ethical, very fair, very approachable. My suggestions are considered and implemented at school-wide level.

Ms Sonia responded to a question about school support for both Sasha and Samuel:

Sasha gets the full support of the principal and me ... she knows she can knock on my door anytime ... Also, we do not pull 'rank' on each other in this school in terms of work. I would go to Mr ... [Samuel], a Post Level 1, for advice on an exam timetable, we work together ... Everything is transparent. We take everything to staff, so they may suggest. Tell them what we want to do. We need their input too.

Derrington and Angelle (2013, p. 4) find that “principals are critical to teacher leadership support and success in a school”, as they are able to build a culture of distributed leadership through positive actions that support a culture and environment for shared leadership opportunities. Sterrett (2022) maintains that principals are effective catalysts that drive school improvement by leveraging TL support. Kraft and Falken (2020) add that schools with stronger climates retain teachers and motivate them to improve learner performance, while Zepeda et al. (2013) and Nappi (2014) argue that healthy, collaborative school climates attract teachers to the profession and can reduce teacher burnout. TL is a necessary mechanism that can positively reconceptualise the teaching profession, by helping teachers to re-imagine better, richer prospects in teaching.

Conclusion

This study revealed that TL development is a product of teacher leaders' personal initiative, self-motivation, and dedicated work towards their own development and school improvement. The teacher leaders did not begin their leadership journey knowing that leadership development would be an outcome, but simply wished to serve their schools better. This study revealed that opportunities for development within and beyond the school environment present themselves

to all teachers, however teacher leaders respond more strongly and positively to these opportunities than other teachers. What sets them apart from ordinary or reluctant teachers is how they respond to leadership. Aspiring teacher leaders who seek to acquire leadership skills

should consciously take responsibility for and take the initiative in their own development and leadership learning, engage in deep reflection and critique, and constantly strive to improve their practices with a humble demeanour. Teachers who do not wish to venture on this leadership journey remain “ordinary” teachers, who perform the usual, allocated tasks of teaching before repeating the same activities the next day. Such teachers are easily demotivated and pessimistic about teaching, and often become bored and even more reluctant. TL could therefore transform the educational system, since teacher leaders positively transform all, they come into contact with, and enrich the teaching profession.

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Malik: Leadership development of teachers

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Malik: Leadership development of teachers

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