# Navigating the Roles of Leadership: Mentors Perspectives on Teacher Leadership

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Abstract

The qualitative study described in this paper began as a collaborative project between three

Universities offering comprehensive induction programs to first year teachers.  Fourteen teacher

mentors were selected to participate in this case study of teacher leaders and leadership. Three of

the fourteen teacher leaders were selected to participate in a special case study of their leadership

development. The researchers found their leadership qualities to be exemplary and wanted to

explore in more depth the three teacher leaders and how they developed and shared their skills as

leaders with their mentees and colleagues. The three participants represent perspectives from

three states: Missouri, Nebraska, and Texas. All  three participants discuss their perspectives on

leadership, the challenges they faced in their role as mentors, how they learned to navigate

school culture in the role of mentor teacher leader, and their influence on their mentees.

**Background**

This study was conducted by members of the Comprehensive Teacher Induction

Consortium (CTIC). The CTIC, a national organization formed in 2008, includes a group of

teacher induction programs that have successfully utilized a similar model for the past 20 years.

Although seven programs have been identified in the United States, the consortium currently has

five researchers who collaborate across programs.  The researchers/teacher educators represent

the following universities:  University of Missouri, University of Nebraska at Omaha, and

Texas State University- San Marcos. All three  programs are based on the Albuquerque  Public

Schools/University of New Mexico (APS/UNM) Teacher Induction Program model, which was established in 1984.

After meeting to discuss our common goals for teacher induction and mentoring, the researchers agreed to collaborate in an effort to share ideas and research opportunities. Our comprehensive teacher induction programs enable us to compare data across programs because we share five crucial components (a) a full year of mentored support for first-year, already certified teachers by full-time experienced teachers who have been released from their classroom duties; (b) ongoing support for mentors in the form of weekly or monthly seminars; (c) coursework leading to a master's degree, which new teachers complete in 15 months; (d) a cohort group of beginning teachers; and (e) job-embedded professional development (e.g., teacher research, peer coaching, videotaped teaching reflections (Gilles, Davis, & McGlamery, 2009).

Over the past year our research team has collected data on mentor teachers as teacher leaders. Using a common set of interview questions we explored many aspects of teacher leadership, including the contributions of mentor teachers to the development of beginning teachers' leadership skills. In this paper we will share some of our findings on mentor teachers and their leadership contributions.

Our purposes in writing this paper are to highlight the contributions mentor teachers have made in the development of teacher leaders. And further, to make explicit the personal challenges mentors face as teacher leaders, and how their leadership has influenced the development of their mentees as teacher leaders. In this paper we will present three case studies of mentors who have been recognized as outstanding teacher leaders by school districts, principals, and their teacher mentees.

**Literature Review**

One need not delve very deeply into the research to find that classroom teachers are stepping outside of their classrooms and becoming more involved in leadership roles within their buildings, districts, and communities (Harrison & Killion , 2007; Kurtz, 2009). Many teachers are released from their full-time teaching responsibilities to serve in the role of mentor to new teachers in their buildings or districts. Mentors assume a wide range of roles in their leadership positions. Some of the roles are formally assigned, whereas other roles are informal. Whether their roles are assigned formally or informally, mentors assist in shaping the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of their mentees and colleagues. Further, mentors assist in improving school culture, and influence practice among their mentees and peers (Barth, 2001; Danielson, 2006; Kurtz, 2009).

Mentors serve their mentees, district, and P-12 students as curriculum and instructional specialists, resource providers, classroom supporters and learning facilitators, school leaders and learners, data coaches, and catalysts for change (Harrison & Killion , 2007). Teacher leaders who step into the role of mentor face significant responsibilities. Within these multifaceted roles, mentors encounter triumphs and challenges. Effective teacher leaders draw upon their extensive knowledge of curriculum, best practices, and current research and courageously share their experiences and expertise with their mentees and peers. Mentors step up and accept the responsibility for the learning of each and every student, act as role models for their colleagues and mentees, and guide and support them in the quest to improve school culture and achievement (Educators 2000).

**Methodology**

This study was nested within a theoretical construct of constructivism. The theory of constructivism emphasizes that individuals actively construct their own knowledge (Smith, 1971; Woolfolk,1999).  Our goal was to capture the individual mentors constructed understandings of teacher leadership.   In order to accomplish the task, the researchers developed a set of semi-structured interview questions.   For the purpose of this research, the interview questions utilized were focused, semi-structured, and open-ended (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that the unstructured interview is the best mode to use for a naturalistic study. However, Merriam (2009) suggested that in a qualitative study, one may also use a less structured format—the semi-structured interview.

In this study, we conducted two rounds of interviews using the semi-structured interview format. Fourteen mentors in the CTIC participated in Interview I, which focused on teacher induction and the development of teacher leadership. Following analysis of data from Interview 1, we desired additional data regarding how mentors' understanding of leadership had changed, challenges mentors faced in their role as mentor, how they learned to navigate school culture, and how their mentorship influenced their mentees to be leaders. Each CTIC group chose one mentor to be interviewed a second time. Jill, Nelda, and Kate (pseudonyms) participated in Interview II and responded to additional questions designed to help us further understand the dynamics, roles, and responsibilities of those serving in mentoring roles.

**Participants**

Three teacher leaders were invited to participate in this study. Jill, Nelda, and Kate each served as mentors to beginning teachers in the CTIC. Jill had been an educator for more than 25 years. She had served in many roles in her career: classroom teacher, administrative assistant,

reading specialist, and mentor. Over the past 12 years, she had mentored 26 teachers. Nelda, a

reserved, soft-spoken Hispanic female in her mid-fifties, had been an educator for more than 20

years. For most her teaching career, she taught third and fourth grade. In 2005, Nelda began

serving in the role of mentor to teachers in her district. Kate, as well, had been involved in

education for 20 years and had served as a mentor at the elementary level for the last 4 years. She

had also served as a mentor at a middle school for 6 years, and had taught fifth, sixth and seventh

grades. Kate had fulfilled various leadership responsibilities for both her school and the district.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to consider the following questions, which were the basis

for interview II: How has your understanding of leadership changed since you became a mentor?

What are some challenges you have faced in your leadership role and how you have met them?

How do you navigate school culture and how do you help others navigate it? How do you feel

you've influenced mentees to be leaders?  Give one example of a mentee that you have followed:

How has that person become a leader?  What influence do you think you have had on your

mentee?

**Findings:**

**Perspectives on Leadership**

**Jill.** When asked: How has your understanding of leadership changed since you became a

mentor? Jill responded: "Leaders have a vision for the future. They have the ability to help others

see that vision and want to be a part of it." She continued,

> I have always understood that leaders must not be afraid to face confrontation; however, I
>
> now have more tools to be able to do that.  I have attended workshops, read books,
>
> practiced with peers, and initiated some fierce conversations.  Some of those

conversations resulted in positive change.  Some of them did not.  So another understanding of leadership is that not everyone is always going to be 100% committed to the tasks that I am committed to, but I have to know that I have tried all possible avenues before I can accept that fact.

**Nelda.** According to Nelda, serving as a full-time mentor helped her expand in her role as a teacher leader. She defined a teacher leader as, "a teacher of teachers. A teacher leader is someone effective, experienced, and knowledgeable . . . [someone who] is willing to take the responsibility of supporting and facilitating professional growth for teachers." She demonstrated this ability to help novice teachers grow professionally by helping them develop plans for improvement in their classrooms, especially in the area of literacy instruction. Nelda pointed out, "I try to help them create a strategic plan to help their readers become better readers and their writers become better writers, especially those struggling students . . ."

A critical part of this planning process, she explained, involves analyzing student data and using this information to guide instruction.  The novice teachers' instructional plans also needed to be aligned to the district and state standards. "We came up with plans on how to focus on those struggling students who were having a hard time, and how to help them become more successful readers and writers," Nelda noted. Not only did she help teachers develop strategic and focused plans for improvement, she actually modeled effective instruction in their classrooms. For example, she demonstrated how to implement guided reading, book talks, the workshop approach, and reading/writing conferences. She scaffolded the teachers' learning by coming along side, observing, and gently coaching them as they tried out these strategies on their own. This *side by side* approach to mentoring helped novice teachers practice and develop expertise under the guidance of a more knowledgeable peer.  In an online interview survey, one

of Nelda's mentees wrote: "Nelda's expertise was invaluable. After 7 years of teaching, I still use some of her strategies with struggling readers." Another mentioned: "Nelda was such an inspiration and so helpful to have by my side during my first year of teaching. I value how she showed me the importance of modeling for young children, especially in writing."

**Kate.** When asked her views on leadership, Kate maintained, "The role itself [being a mentor] requires you to step up and be a leader. To anticipate the needs of others and be able to meet those needs in a way that is timely and respectful and allows others to see their strengths while at the same time building upon those things that they need to work on." She suggested that the beginning teachers (mentees), the other teachers  and the principal look to the mentor for leadership in natural ways.  Because Kate had a flexible schedule, she was more readily available to problem-solve with teachers and the principal, and these conversations could lead to new ideas or initiatives. As Kate maintained , "You are stepping forward to take on those roles and initiate some of those roles."  Kate also believed that the Teacher Induction Program helped her develop leadership skills.  She cited the monthly meetings, in which the CTIC coordinators shared information about mentoring, coaching and classroom research, as helping her develop a stronger mentoring skill-set.  In addition  she suggested that the monthly meetings enabled her "to network with other mentors, to hear what they are doing,  to gain ideas through them.  I think that the topics that we talk about help me to … be a reflective practitioner."  Kate also believed that being in classrooms as an observer put her in a slightly more analytical position in which "you are trying to figure out things so you can support the beginning teachers (mentees)."  Those experiences honed her skills as a teacher.


**Findings: Challenges**

**Jill.** Jill faced challenges in her role as mentor. She noted that she had grown stronger in her belief that teachers must develop a variety of strategies to meet the needs of all students "one size does not fit all." She continued,

It is a challenge when I mentor someone who is teaching a grade level or content area that is not in my "background experience." As an example, I am an elementary teacher by degree and experience. This year I have mentored a high school biology and chemistry teacher. I first had to establish myself in his mind as being an asset. I confidently described how I could help him with classroom management, lesson design, understanding assessments, differentiation, and student, parent, and peer relationships. I told him who my 'lifelines' would be when I could not help him with specific curriculum content questions. After that, I made sure that I listened carefully to his questions and concerns and used my lifelines to give him the best information possible. I scheduled an opportunity for him to observe district peers teaching the same classes that he teaches, thus increasing his network of science experts.

**Nelda.** With her principal's encouragement, Nelda left the familiarity of her own classroom and moved into the unchartered territory of full-time mentoring. Her three mentees were placed in different grade levels and on various elementary campuses throughout the large, suburban district. "I was a little nervous, but excited to take the challenge," Nelda explained. In addition to getting to know three new teachers, various grade-level expectations, and the cultures of three different campuses, Nelda felt the pressure of making sure the new program was a success in her district. She described her feelings:

What made me the most nervous about this job was that that the program was new to the district, so I would be the first to take on this position. I felt a big responsibility to

represent our district well and to make sure the program was a success. It was challenging

at first because I had to learn about the program and its expectations, at the same time

that I was getting to know my three mentees and the three campuses that they were

assigned to in the district. I found each school to be unique and different -starting from

the students that they served to the expectations and responsibilities of the teachers. Not

only were the schools very different, but so were my three mentees. Each had their

unique personalities, learning styles, strengths and challenges. I quickly realized that this

year was going to be quite a learning experience for us all.

**Kate.** Kate saw leaders as having "vision, innovation, integrity, flexibility and a kind of

emotional intelligence to be able to read people." When she was a classroom teacher, she saw

leaders making decisions, organizing things and leading people. But, she maintained, "You have

a very narrow view of what that looks like from inside the classroom walls." When she stepped

out of the classroom and saw the building and the district as a whole, "it was just a completely

different opportunity and viewpoint of what leadership truly is." Moving out of the classroom

gave her insight into why the decisions were made; she had a broader perspective. Kate's

challenge had been seeing the issues/problems of education from the district level.

Working with a principal who believed in shared decision-making and developing the

piloting on co-teaching for the district also were pivotal in her changing view of leadership.

Three years ago Kate attended a professional development meeting about co-teaching. She

excitedly reported to her principal that co-teaching would be perfect. Kate reflected,

We could have easily said at that point, 'That is what we are doing.' There is no

ownership in that…. There is a huge difference between buy-in an ownership. Buy-in is

that you are selling, selling, selling and finally they relent and say, and 'Ok we'll do it.'

Whereas, ownership is where they really have a voice in making that decision.

So, Kate and her principal presented the information they had, their vision of co-teaching for her

mentee, including the benefits and the potential challenges. They gave teachers time to ask

questions and talk with one another, gave them space to consider and think and finally

administered an anonymous survey.  Had the results of the survey not been positive, they would

not have moved forward.  This experience and many like it convinced Kate that "a leader is

someone who partners with others and helps them to make good decisions.  A leader is someone

who shares their leadership with others and promotes others and helps them see their strengths

and successes as assets and used them to better the school."


**Findings: Navigating School Culture**

**Jill.** Jill noted that she had the opportunity to collaborate with a variety of professionals

with a variety of different viewpoints in her role as teacher, as well as in her role as mentor.

Interacting with many different stakeholders caused her to look deeply at her personal beliefs to

assist her in navigating school culture. She stated:

I observe the way the administrator speaks of and to his/her staff and observe how the

staff interacts with each other.  I form opinions but do not share those opinions with my

mentee.  I ask open ended, non-judgmental questions, such as, "What was on the PLC

[Professional Learning Community] agenda this morning?"  If my mentee shares an

opinion of the working of the team that matches my observations, I concur.  If that

opinion is positive, I talk about how powerful that is, how lucky the teachers are, and

how to best take advantage of that culture.  If the opinion is negative, I talk about what

can be done to make it more positive, more productive, and how to not let that negativity consume them. If our opinions were not the same, I would ask guiding questions to ensure a positive and productive work environment.

**Nelda.** She characterized her role as a mentor to the novice teachers as "not only a supporter but also a catalyst for change." She explained, "Even though they weren't firm in their beliefs and philosophies about teaching and learning, [I was interested in] getting them to shift their thinking a little bit and being open to ideas that may be a better way, a different way." Through this gentle nudging based on classroom data, Nelda was able to help novices transform their practice. Moir, Barlin, Gless, and Miles (2009) suggested, she was involved in "rigorous instructional mentoring" (p. 38). They explained, "Instructional mentoring ensures that all interactions are grounded in evidence and critical dialogues about instruction" (p. 38).

This influence expanded beyond just helping her mentees navigate school culture. Frequently, when she saw an area of need, Nelda conducted an informal workshop in the classroom of one of the novice teacher's or her office area and invited other teachers to attend as well.

**Kate.** Kate assisted all new teachers in navigating the culture of the school. Kate felt ownership in her school's culture: "To navigate the culture myself I continually go back the vision *we* created, about who do we want to be, and how do we interact, how do we want to be seen by people who walk in our building." She talked about being "very purposeful" about working with new staff to help them navigate the culture, through professional development for new teachers, weekly breakfasts to help them talk and problem-solve, reading about school culture, and discussions and even role playing she did with new teachers at her school. Kate considered her school culture to be child-centered, collaborative, solution seeking, and positive.

Finally, being in classrooms she could see the mentees daily and watch them change and grow. She saw their unique talents and used her position to "nudge" current and especially former mentees into leadership roles. She maintained,

> They are very talented young people. So, being able to recognize what their talents are and to really kind of give them the nudge to say, "Why don't you share that with your whole team? Why don't you present at the faculty meeting? Why don't you present at that conference? So it is kind of like being there to hear their ideas and giving them that gentle nudge."

She looked for opportunities that would launch new teachers into leadership niches in the school because they had new information to share with colleagues.

## Findings: Influencing Mentees

**Jill.** When asked to consider how she had influenced mentees to be leaders, Jill responded, "Several of my mentees have said that they want my job! Many that I have mentored have taken on building and district responsibilities. Many welcome beginning teachers into their classrooms to observe and collaborate." Jill was asked to provide an example of a mentee whom she has followed, how that mentee became a leader, and any influence she had on the mentee. Jill provided the following example:

> Jesse was a teacher whom I mentored 7 years ago. I maintained regular contact with her through those years. She was a teacher leader in her building, served on district level teams and committees, and when she moved to another building, she quickly became a teacher leader there. When I needed someone to partner with me for my mentoring and district responsibilities, I encouraged her to apply. She sailed through the interview and

was hired. So again, I was mentoring her as she began 'my' job. It was her drive to be the best educator possible and her dispositions about what makes a good teacher good that made her a leader. My influence came when I listened and encouraged.

**Nelda.** In her last year as a mentor, one of Nelda's previous mentees, Becky, became a mentor for the program. Thus, Nelda's influence as a mentor expanded to "mentoring a mentor." Nelda described Becky as a confident young teacher who had the "courage to take on leadership positions" in her classroom and beyond. She elaborated,

> [Becky] quickly became a leader at her school and then for the district. She was presenting district trainings, and her classroom became a model for other teachers to observe reading/writing workshops. She was known throughout the district as a teacher leader.

Just as Nelda had supported Becky in her first year as a classroom teacher, she was there to guide and support her during her first year as a mentor. "I was excited that we would be closely working and learning together again," she wrote. This experience provided Nelda with an additional level of leadership.

**Kate.** At the same time that Kate was nudging current and former Fellows into leadership positions, she also had the ear of the principal. So, it was quite natural to remind the principal of the special qualities of the mentees or other new teachers' as names were being discussed for committee assignments, conference attendance, and the like. Kate worked with the principal to help support new teachers in assuming these leadership roles, and she maintained a strong relationship with them, so they could come to her if they had any struggles along the way. Thus Kate supported leadership of new teachers by mentoring and coaching them in the classroom,

helping them to learn and navigate the school culture, nudging them into new leadership ventures, and then being available with support as they took on new challenges.

**Summary**

Jill, Nelda, and Kate shared how they learned to navigate the roles of leadership while serving as mentors. Each had a unique leadership style. Jill was characterized by her program director as "a resilient leader." With more than 20 years of experience in elementary, middle, and high schools, Jill was willing to challenge herself each year and mentor other teachers as requested. The program director noted that without Jill's flexibility, knowledge, skills, and resilient attitude, the program would not be the same.

One administrator characterized Nelda as "a quiet leader" who had significant impact not only on the mentees but on other teachers as well. Nelda decided to retire at the end of the school year. Her plans for the future included getting "her teaching fix," as she called it, by visiting in former mentees' classrooms and volunteering in one of the district's low-income schools. Although retiring, her influence as a teacher leader would not end. In her own quiet way, Nelda continued to serve as a teacher of teachers.

Kate was characterized as "an innovative leader." Kate continued to serve in various leadership roles for both her school and district. In her school, she worked with all pre-service and new teachers, developed curriculum, spearheaded various initiatives, and led committees. She coordinated the new-teacher induction program for her district as well as teaching Cognitive Coaching twice a year for district teachers and administrators.

Leadership styles varied for the participants in this study. Mentors can be described as quiet, resilient, innovative, knowledgeable, skilled, and courageous. Regardless of how a mentor is characterized, his or her leadership is critical in shaping the knowledge, skills, and dispositions

of mentees. Each mentor in this study fulfilled multiple roles and shared her perspectives as she engaged in the roles of: curriculum and instructional specialist, resources provider, classroom supporter and learning facilitators, school leader and leaner, data coach, and catalyst for change (Harrison & Killion, 2007).

**Implications**

1. When mentor/mentees are supported through professional development, professional learning communities, opportunities for dialogue, and other ways in school districts, the ultimate winners are the children. The children gain in achievement when their teachers gain in skill and efficacy.

2. Mentors have to grow into leadership. Although others assume that they are leaders once they become mentors, many do not feel like leaders immediately. They try on the role and experiment. Thus it is essential that mentors have some sort of ongoing support, either through participation in professional learning communities, school and university partnership professional development activities, or engagement in dialogue with former mentors to gain valuable insight and ideas of how to make the transition from classroom teacher to mentor.

3. Relationship building is absolutely essential if mentors are to garner trust of their mentees and other teachers. If they mentor outside of their expertise, they must be honest about the support they can and cannot give.

4. Mentors can nudge others into leadership roles by encouraging new teachers to consider a leadership role and by reminding principals of the gifts and merits of new teachers.

5. There are different stages of mentoring—induction programs need to be aware of different needs of mentors and adjust level of support accordingly for example by differentiating types of support for mentors who are mentoring mentors.

6. Mentor/induction programs need to include information on how to learn about school cultures, various instructional practices, formative assessment, and adult learning and novice teacher stages.

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