UNDERSTANDING TEACHER LEADERSHIP IN CONTEXT:

A QUALITATIVE, HEURISTIC STUDY

By

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To the faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of

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UNDERSTANDING TEACHER LEADERSHIP IN CONTEXT:
A QUALITATIVE, HEURISTIC STUDY

Abstract

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The purpose of this qualitative, heuristic inquiry was two-fold: First, the study explored the lived experiences of four teacher leaders working in one comprehensive high school in a district where the researcher is superintendent. The second purpose was to learn from the experiences of the teacher leaders to inform district level actions that could develop structures and resources to support the work of these and other current and emerging teacher leaders. The study addressed these questions: (a) What are the teacher leaders’ personal and professional histories, qualities, and dispositions? (b) What is the nature and purpose of the work of these teacher leaders? (c) What are the contextual elements of the school district that either support or create challenges for the work of these teacher leaders? (d) What is the impact of the work of these teacher leaders? (e) What lessons can be drawn from the work of the teacher leaders to inform my actions as superintendent and improve school district structures and processes in order to support and encourage the work of these and other teacher leaders? Data were collected through individual and focus group in-depth interviews. In addition, since this was a heuristic study, the researcher also kept journal notes regarding learning from the perspective of the superintendent, actions that were taken as a result of this learning, and observations of various
meetings and workshops related to these action. Based on this data, portraits of the four teacher leaders were developed to illustrate the teacher leaders’ history and dispositions, the work they chose, and the context in which the work took place. Analysis of the data resulted in 19 themes organized into 4 major categories: Teacher leader dispositions, purposes of teacher leadership, means of teacher leadership, and context of teacher leadership. Based on this analysis, a conceptual framework for teacher leadership was developed that emphasizes the interactive, interdependent nature of the components of teacher leadership identified in this study. The heuristic approach resulted in a set of learning and actions taken with the school district.
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Dedication

This dissertation thesis is dedicated to Betty Irene (Ridgway) Sturm and Paul Peter Sturm, my late mother and father, who gave me life and made significant sacrifices in their own to provide opportunities for me.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

After nearly three decades of K-12 school reform in the United States, policy makers, educators, and researchers continue to struggle to find ways to address the learning needs of all children. While leadership is acknowledged as an important factor in improving schools and student achievement (Elmore, 2000; Waters & Marzano, 2007), traditional conceptualizations of leadership are seen as insufficient to meet the challenges facing public education today (2000). The increasingly complex societal and global contexts in which children live and will work require new approaches to teaching and learning, and consequently, new approaches to leadership. The kind of leadership that is needed has become a recent topic of concern and study (Elmore, 2006; Fullan, 2005; Sergiovanni, 2005; Foster, 2005; Furman & Starratt, 2002, Murphy, 2000). Some promising concepts, including distributed and teacher leadership, are being developed and explored (Danielson; 2006; Harris, 2003; Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Murphy, 2005; Reeves, 2008; Spillane, 2005, 2006; Spillane & Orlina, 2005; Spillane, et. al., 2001). In regard to teacher leadership, specifically, writers argue that such leadership is a key to improving student outcomes, and researchers are beginning to address the phenomenon by focusing on the roles and characteristics of teacher leaders. However, to date, there is little empirical research on the actual experiences of teacher leaders from their perspective (Murphy, 2005).

This qualitative, heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990; Patton, 2002) explores the lived experiences of four identified teacher leaders working together in one high school to improve learning and achievement among an identified group of students. The study is heuristic in that I
am also the superintendent for the school district and wanted to learn with these teacher leaders how to support their work and the work of other current and emerging teacher leaders.

This chapter provides an overview of the study, including a background section on teacher leadership and a statement of the study’s purpose and research questions. Also included are brief descriptions of the study’s methods, ethical considerations, and my position as a researcher. Finally, the framework for the entire report is outlined.

Research Problem

Past efforts to improve schools have persistently focused on large scale system reforms even though there is evidence that there are more effective and affordable means available involving teachers working collaboratively with administrators at the school and classroom level to improve student learning (Schmoker, 2004). The developing concept of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006) contrasts a networked and interdependent conceptualization of leadership with traditional hierarchal models (Daft, 1999; Marion, 2002). Related to the concept of distributed leadership, teacher leadership is receiving increased attention from scholars. Murphy (2005) claims that teacher leadership is necessary if school reform is to succeed in its effort to improve instruction and student achievement. Professional relationships in schools must become collaborative rather than hierarchal, according to Murphy, leadership should be viewed from a distributed rather than a centralized perspective (Spillane, 2005). Lieberman and Miller (2004) argue that teaching must move from “individualism to professional community,” and that the work of teachers must move from “technical and managed toward inquiry and leadership” (p. 11). They add,

Teacher leaders are in a unique position to make change happen. They are close to the ground and have the knowledge and ability to control the conditions for teaching and learning in schools and classrooms. We believe that they are critical partners in transforming schooling. (p. 12)
To date, the literature on teacher leadership has been primarily conceptual and hortatory. For example, Elmore (2002) argues that teacher leadership is needed to return professionalism to teaching and more tightly couple individual teachers to common organizational goals and purposes. Reeves (2008) claims that teacher leaders will be essential for schools to change. Lieberman and Miller (2004) describe teacher leadership roles and organizational realities, portray teacher leadership as learning in practice, and suggest teacher leadership can influence the reshaping school culture. Lieberman and Miller also suggest that collegial relationship and networks of practice are essential to ongoing development of a teacher leader. However, Murphy (2005) claims there is still much to learn about the role of teacher leadership in improving schools and student learning. Furthermore, the limited empirical research on teacher leadership tends to explore the roles and characteristics of teacher leaders and provides little evidence of effects such as improved instructional practice and student achievement (Gronn, 2002; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Furthermore, Murphy (2005) points out that the voices of teachers and their perspectives are conspicuously missing from the conversation about teacher.

To address this research gap, this qualitative, heuristic inquiry (Patton, 2002) explores the experiences of four teacher leaders working together in one comprehensive high school to improve learning and achievement among an identified group of students. As superintendent in the school district, I became interested in their work as it related to the literature on teacher leadership. The teachers and I sought, by studying and learning from their experiences, to identify actions, structures, and procedures that support the work of these and other current and emerging teacher leaders.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative, heuristic inquiry was two-fold. First, the study set out to explore the lived experiences of four teacher leaders working in one comprehensive high school
in a district where I am the superintendent. The identified teacher leaders’ work focused on improving learning and achievement for a set of students identified to be at risk of failing to meet state standards and local graduation requirements. The second purpose of this study was to learn from the experiences of the teacher leaders to inform my actions, as superintendent, so that I could help the school district develop structures and resources to support the work of these and other current and emerging teacher leaders.

Specifically, the study addressed these questions: (a) What are the teacher leaders’ personal and professional histories, qualities, and dispositions? (b) What is the nature and purpose of the work of these teacher leaders? (c) What are the contextual elements of the school district that either support or create challenges for the work of these teacher leaders? (d) What is the impact of the work of these teacher leaders? (e) What lessons can be drawn for the work of the teacher leaders to inform the actions of the superintendent and improve the structures and processes within the district in support of teacher leaders?

Method

This study is a qualitative, heuristic inquiry. Patton (2002) states, “Heuristics is a form of phenomenological inquiry that brings to the fore the personal experiences and insights of the researcher” (p. 107). Guided by this definition, the participants and I brought our collective experiences and insights together to develop an understanding of the phenomenon of teacher leadership and to learn from each other. Through this study I sought lessons to inform my own practice as superintendent aimed at supporting the work of the four teachers and other developing teacher leaders throughout the district.

The four teacher leaders who participated in the study were selected because they demonstrated teacher leadership as defined in the literature. York-Barr and Duke (2004) and
Lieberman and Miller (2004), help define teacher leadership as being carried out by valued and supported teachers who are oriented toward learning; whose work is collaborative from both formal and informal points of influence, focused on developing organizational capacity for instruction that will support the whole life of students and improve students’ learning. Reflecting this definition, the teachers in this study had identified a learning problem in their school. They gave support as they took steps to learn about the problem and researched potential solutions. The teachers presented their findings formally and informally, they implemented interventions, and adjusted them as they learned about the students and their learning needs. Over time, the group of students that the teacher leaders targeted with learning interventions demonstrated improved achievement (see Appendix G). As teacher leaders, the four teachers took steps to make their work public and to share what they were learning with other teachers and administrators in an effort to influence the culture of the school to include a collective responsibility toward solving learning problems.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with the four teacher leaders. Following the individual interviews, three of the four participants were able to come together in a focus group interview. In an effort to bring the voices of the teachers in the study to the fore, brief portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 2002) of each of the four participants are presented in Chapter 4. In the tradition of qualitative research analysis (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003a, 2003b; Patton, 2002), the interview data were analyzed by repeatedly reading the data, constructing memos, and coding emerging ideas and concepts. The analysis resulted in a set of 19 themes organized into 4 categories, which are presented in Chapter 5. Comparing the analytical findings to the literature, I developed a new conceptual framework for teacher
leadership that emphasizes the interactions of various components of teacher leadership, which is presented in Chapter 6.

My work as superintendent was informed and influenced by the study, the actions of the participants, and my own experiences while engaged in the study. Throughout this heuristic study, the participants and I sought to learn from our interactions and experiences within the specific shared context of our work in the district. I was seeking to learn what might support and encourage teacher leaders working to improve instruction and student learning. It was my intention throughout to do no harm to participants or others present in the setting of this study. Because this study was conducted within the district where I am the superintendent, we acknowledged at the outset that confidentiality would be difficult to assure. The four teachers selected for this study, upon learning about the study and being informed of the potential risks, gave written consent to become participants. Throughout the study potential risks were discussed. The participants were given the opportunity to review some of the writing representing their words and to provide feedback about their level of comfort with the report. I conveyed to the participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time; however, each participated with enthusiasm.

Study Report

The report of this study consists of six chapters. This first chapter provided an introduction and overview of the study. Chapter 2 gives a brief review of literature related the research problem and purpose of the study. Chapter 3 describes the methods for the study, including heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990; Patton, 2002) and portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis 2002). Chapter 4 presents portraits of each of the four teacher leaders. Chapter 5 explores the themes that were identified through analysis of the data and includes the voices of
the teachers to illustrate those themes. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the report with a discussion of conclusions, actions taken, and recommendations for further study.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will briefly review the literature that is relevant to the study’s topic and purposes. Included are sections on traditional and reform leadership tensions, distributed leadership, teacher leadership, and emerging teacher leadership concepts.

Traditional Leadership and Education Reform Tensions

School leadership conceptualizations with roots in the traditions of the scientific era of the early 20th century have given us standardization, an emphasis on efficiency and productivity, along with scientific and bureaucratic management influences from business and industry. These influences have shown resurgence throughout the education reform movement since the 1980s, creating dilemmas for public education (Daft, 1999; Elmore, 2005; Marion, 2002; Murphy, 2005). According to Hallinger and Leithwood (1996), writing at a point about half way through the current reform era,

The past 15 years have been a time of questioning and introspection in the field of educational administration. Virtually every facet of the field—policy, practice, training, theory and research—has been inspected closely; each has been found wanting in more than one respect. As in the field of general management, the paradigms that have guided administrative practice in education have come under scrutiny for their applicability and effectiveness in a changing world. (p. 98)

Not much has changed since then, and this statement would be relevant if made today. More recently, Elmore (2002) argues that traditional leadership concepts are lacking because they do not fully address the dimensions and dynamics of the leadership that actually exists in schools. Leadership and organizational structures are being reconsidered and restructured to meet the instructional and learning needs of ever more diverse learners more effectively. Today’s learners face a future that is more global and interdependent than ever before (Elmore, 2005; Fullan, 2006; Lieberman & Miller, 2004).
However, traditional leadership models still influence and encumber public schools. Centralization and standardization, characteristics of the “scientific management” era of the early 20th century, are evident today in the policy environment created by Federal “No Child Left Behind” act of 2002 and other reform initiatives. (Elmore, 2000; Foster, 2004; Goldring & Greenfield, 2002). In addition, trait theories, from the “heroic leader” model, rather than a focus on pedagogical expertise when selecting leaders and teachers, may contribute to the lack of professionalism and control over education’s core functions, teaching, and learning (2000). Public school leadership concepts, informed more from administrative and management ideas rather than pedagogical knowledge and expertise, also diminish the focus on teaching and learning as the core functions of K-12 public schools (Murphy, 2005).

Bureaucratic structures have been blamed for creating a “loose coupling” of the functions of public school systems, and even individual schools. This “loose coupling” may be the greatest impediment to transforming schools into what they must become (Elmore, 2002). For example, K-12 public schools are organized into discrete units such as individual classrooms, grade levels, and content areas rather than in a manner recognizing the whole system as interdependent and working together. This “loose coupling” causes teachers to form personalized and independent rather than shared instructional visions and goals. Isolation of practice, rather than transparency, collaboration, and the development of a shared vision and commitment, has led to a view of teaching as technical rather than professional. This “loose coupling” characteristic confounds the need for professional leadership practice that is distributed, collaborative and shares a common vision (Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Murphy, 2005).

Standardization of assessment and pedagogy that is technical rather than professional has moved educational leaders and policy makers away from the work of educational equity, away
from meeting the needs of diverse learners in an increasingly global world, and away from a fundamental mission of developing democratically engaged citizens (Foster, 2004; Furman & Starratt, 2002; Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Murphy, 2000; Petrovich, 2005; Goldring & Greenfield, 2002). Writers like Ogbu (1992) and Foster (2004) lament the lack of attention to educational equity for students of diverse cultures at a time when our nation and our schools are becoming more diverse. The standards movement has largely ignored issues of educational equity, and many of the recent educational, social, and economic policies run counter to resolving the achievement gap (Kozol, 1991, 2005; Petrovich, 2005). Many scholars argue that instead of standardizing and mandating one way to teach and assess all children, what is needed are school leaders who are culturally proficient who can lead their schools toward a culturally proficient pedagogy that is responsive to the unique needs of diverse learners (Foster, 2004, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lindsey, et al., 2005; Robins, et al., 2006). Others call for school leadership that can move schools away from bureaucratic management toward a model of democratic schools that not only teach about democratic principles, but also prepare citizens to be engaged in democratic processes (Furman & Starratt, 2002; Murphy, 2000).

Educational leaders in the field are caught in the tension between a policy environment that reflects old traditions in leadership theory and growing awareness of the need to align practices with new concepts in educational leadership. While recent leadership theory has expanded to recognize the distributed, adaptive, contextual nature of leadership in practice, K-12 public schools, and many policies governing them, cling to leadership traditions based on bureaucratic and hierarchal management approaches with ever more centralized control. Furthermore, there is a risk that even new conceptualizations of leadership will be informed by traditional administrative and management knowledge rather than pedagogical expertise, and
erode the potential of these new leadership forms to bring about needed changes (Elmore, 2005; Murphy, 2005). According to Goldring and Greenfield (2002), there are three choices: to continue the bureaucratic management approach, move into a market-like environment characterized by school choice, charter schools, vouchers, etc., or reform schools toward a communitarian and social justice agenda that can respond to the unique context and environment in which a school is situated. Elmore (2002) argues that until public schools move away from centralized bureaucratic and technical systems toward a system that encourages professionalization of teaching little or no progress can be made to improve them.

Leadership for K-12 public schools remains an elusive and perplexing concept characterized by diverse definitions, descriptions, and theoretical constructs (e.g., Gronn, 2002; Marzano, et al., 2005; Spillane, 2006). By many accounts, educational leadership is weakly conceptualized and inconsistently defined (Elmore, 2000; Marks & Printy, 2003; Witziers, et al., 2003). Goldring and Greenfield (2002) point out that recognition of the complexity of organizations has resulted in a call for a new kind of leadership; leadership that is personal, moral, transformational, adaptive, distributed, and focused on student learning. This new kind of leadership cannot come from positions of authority alone, but must reflect a more interdependent leadership approach that includes an emphasis on processes, relationships, and interactions. At the same time, bureaucratic structures are seen by some as the glue that holds the whole system together; the structure that is necessary to provide the stability for thoughtful change and improvement in schools (Murphy, 2005)

Examples of new thinking about school leadership are plentiful. Leithwood and Duke (1998) identify six categories of educational leadership: (a) instructional, (b) transformational, (c) moral, (d) participative, (e) managerial, and (f) contingency or style. Ogawa and Bossert
(1995) describe leadership as an organizational rather than an individual quality whereby influence flows through networks of roles rather than contained in roles. Crowther (cited in York-Barr & Duke, 2004) describes parallel leadership between teacher leaders and administrative leaders “activating and sustaining the knowledge generating capacity of schools through mutual respect, shared purpose, and allowance for individual expression” (p. 262).

As recent developments in educational leadership theory in the literature have shifted away from the individual heroic leader, the idea of distributed leadership, which first surfaced in the late 1950s, has reemerged in various forms (Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2003; Spillane, 2005). While traditional leadership studies focus on individuals in official leadership positions, the idea of distributed leadership begins to accept the idea of leadership emerging throughout the organization among and between formal and informal leaders, positions, and roles. Related is the emergence of teacher leadership as a concept focused on teachers as leaders, not only in the realm of classroom instruction, but also concerning organizational change (Smylie et al., 2002). Teacher leadership is recognized in recent literature as one form of distributed leadership (Elmore, 2002; Lieberman & Miller, 2004).

In summary, traditional models of school leadership are seen as insufficient to meet current educational demands. However, current policy and reform initiatives reflect the traditions of scientific management era and the “heroic leader” model by demanding standardization and productivity. Furthermore, many recent school reform efforts have turned away from issues of equity, diversity, social justice, and democratic education. As a result, new leadership concepts such as teacher leadership and distributed leadership are viewed with hope to improve our schools, instruction, and student achievement.
Distributed Leadership

The developing concept of distributed leadership (Elmore, 2002; Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2003; Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Spillane, 2006) portrays leadership as processes between and among members of an organization. Distributed leadership is seen as being stretched across the organization’s social and situational contexts through time. It involves an interactive web of actors, artifacts, and situations (Gronn, 2002; Spillane et al., 2001; Spillane, 2005). The distributed concept of leadership considers the context of schools (Spillane, 2005) in that they respond to organizational change from a systems perspective (Senge, 1990) and to cultural change through environmental adaptation and internal integration (Shein, 1988). In other words, distributed leadership emerges with unique responses to meet the demands of unique situations (Spillane, 2006).

Distributed leadership describes the phenomenon of leadership that emerges naturally (Spillane, 2006). According to Spillane,

A distributed leadership perspective moves beyond the Superman and Wonder Woman view of school leadership. It is about more than accounting for all the leaders in a school and counting up their various actions to arrive at some more comprehensive account of leadership. (p. 3)

Distributed leadership, as a construct, involves formal and informal leaders and followers in processes of collaborative, adaptive, and transformational learning (Heifetz, 1994) that influence and bring about change within a specific setting. Leadership in a distributed perspective involves individual and collective learning in order to advance the shared outcomes of the group or organization (Sergiovanni, 2005). It consists of organizational processes rather than individual behavior (Spillane, 2006).

Traditional leadership studies have focused on individuals in official leadership positions and the traits and actions of those people within leadership positions. However, the idea of
distributed leadership views leadership as emerging among and between formal and informal leaders and roles throughout the organization (Smylie, et al., 2002). A distributed view of leadership in schools is not a prescription for individual leader behavior, but a way to understand, foster, and manage the phenomenon of leadership, as it exists and develops within and across an organization over time (Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2003; Spillane, 2005). Distributed leadership is not shared leadership in the sense of simply creating new positions and sharing authority and responsibility among them in bureaucratic fashion. It is, however, about a conceptualization of how leadership as a process works, how it emerges, and how it evolves to fit the particular context. Distributed leadership conceptualizes relationships that develop through time between formal and informal leaders and between those leaders and followers. It is seen as transformational rather than technical and is viewed from learning rather than an action perspective (Hiefetz, 1994). Spillane (2005) explains, “A distributed perspective is first and foremost about leadership practice, a product of the joint interactions of school leaders, followers, and aspects of their situation such as tools and routines” (p. 3). It is not simply a leader inviting or delegating others to assume some of the leadership duties and responsibilities. “This distributed view of leadership shifts the focus from school principals ...and other formal and informal leaders to the web of leaders, followers, and their situations that gives form to leadership practice” (2005, p. 3).

The concept of distributed leadership does not exclude formal leadership roles or the need for leaders within those roles. “Acknowledging that leadership practice extends beyond the school principal in no way undermines the vital role of the principal in school leadership but instead shows that leadership is often a collective rather than individualistic endeavor” (Spillane, 2005, p. 6). Furthermore, Murphy (2005) points out that bureaucracy in schools is necessary to
give them the structure that holds them together. That means it is important for the principal to retain a formal leadership role and assume specific responsibilities within the organization. The principal has positional responsibilities and authority, initiates leadership processes fostering a climate that encourages the processes of distributed leadership, and establishes systems and procedures that support the work of distributed leaders (Spillane & Orlina, 2005; Murphy, 2005). Distributed leadership describes a reality in which the principal is not the only one who applies leadership or leadership processes. However, distributed leadership does not dismiss formal leaders. The expectation persists within the concept of distributed leadership that a formal or positional leader does not sit on the sidelines and wait for something to happen. The positional leader in a distributed context understands the distributed nature of leadership and is able to use the power of positional authority to orchestrate and participate in leadership as an interactive and relational process for the benefit of the school and its stakeholders. Spillane (2005) points out that, “Thinking about leadership in terms of interactions rather than actions offers a distinctly different perspective on leadership practice” (p. 8).

In summary, distributed leadership offers a phenomenological perspective about leadership in that leadership is an interactive process between formal and informal leaders and followers within a unique context and situation through time. It is focused more on adaptive work than on technical work (Heifetz, 1994), on learning more than acting (Sergiovanni, 2005). It does not disregard bureaucratic structures, but describes leadership as a phenomenon that occurs within them (Murphy, 2005). The idea of distributed leadership does not dismiss formal leaders, but describes a formal leader as a participant interacting with others in the organizations within leadership processes, and who will at times be a follower as well as a leader (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2006). Distributed leadership acknowledges leadership may emerge anywhere in
the organization and is not limited to a person, or in his or her traits, actions, role, or position. Distributed leadership does not describe an organizational chart or formal organizational leadership plan, but instead describes leadership processes that emerge through interactions among actors within an organization.

Teacher Leadership

Conceptualizations of teacher leadership have converged with those of distributed leadership (Elmore, 2002; Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Murphy, 2005; Smylie, et al., 2002; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Teacher leadership has traditionally described roles and responsibilities that often emerge as quasi-administrative in nature. However, teacher leadership has recently been conceptualized as a distributed form of leadership that involves interactions among formal and informal leaders within a particular situation over time (Murphy, 2005). The recent literature on teacher leadership discusses various forms, including (1) formal and informal roles, (2) inquiry and scholarship, and (3) influencing change in school culture and individual or group behaviors (Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Smylie, et al., 2002; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). New concepts about teacher leadership from a distributed perspective place student learning rather than teaching at the center. Teacher leadership is described as occurring within a context of professional learning communities with collaborative practice and inquiry into practice being key elements (Wenger, 1998; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). A model developed by York-Barr and Duke (2004) provides a schema for current thinking about teacher leadership (see Appendix E) and the features describing it.

Not enough is known about the how these new conceptualizations of teacher leadership may improve schools, instruction, and learning outcomes. There is a risk that teacher leadership, informed more from administrative and management knowledge than from pedagogical
expertise, will undermine the distributed quality of teacher leadership described in recent literature. Furthermore, there is caution that the concept of teacher leadership may be used to advance the interest in power and control in schools rather than for improving schools, instruction, and learning. In addition, it has been noted that the voices of teacher leaders are missing from the conversation about teacher leadership (Murphy, 2005).

*Traditional Teacher Leadership Concepts and Forms*

Schools have often tapped teachers for quasi-administrative roles in a bureaucratic sharing of leadership rather than in the character of recently conceived distributed leadership (Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Murphy, 2005). The teacher councils of the 1910s were seen a way to involve teachers more closely in the decisions about schools. In the 1930s teacher involvement in leadership was a way to recognize that in order to teach democratic principles; schools should be run more democratically. Teacher leadership dropped out of the literature in any significant way during the community control movement of the 1960 and 1970s. It resurfaced in the 1980’s in the form of site councils, sometimes involving parent, communities, and teachers, together with administrators making decisions ranging from an advisory capacity to having formalized power to make decisions. These councils, intended to break the inefficiency of the bureaucratic structures in K-12 schools, remain as only vestiges of what they were conceived to be, where they remain at all. These traditional models of teacher leadership have focused on quasi-administrative, management, or advisory roles often with little or no authority (Smylie, et al., 2002).

Conventionally, the norm for the practice of teaching has occurred in isolation with little or no sharing of strategies among peers in a condition referred to as “loose-coupling” (Elmore, 2002). The feedback teachers received came from students rather than colleagues with little room
for public discussion or display of teaching. A weak knowledge base about learning resulted in a kind of blind faith that what teachers were doing was making a difference. Conflicting policies and purposes resulting in a lack of common vision further isolated teachers, forced to create their own rather than a shared sense of goals and expectations for teaching and learning. Controlling student behavior became a substitute within the public school system for taking responsibility for student learning since control is evident while learning is not so readily apparent. The egalitarian nature of the teaching profession has offered little incentive or support for professional growth or career differentiation. Teaching has been treated as technical work and described as a set of skills, behaviors, and techniques to be mastered and evaluated. Teachers have been viewed and treated as quasi-professionals or technicians, responsible for teaching, not learning. As evidenced by the organization and structure of schools, they have not been viewed as true professionals that reflect upon and learn about their practice in order to improve practice, but rather have been isolated to work mostly alone. When they do act as professionals, it is often in spite of the obstacles the system presents to them. Until recently, teachers have generally not been expected to accept responsibility for student learning outcomes, placing that responsibility heavily on administrators, families, curriculum planners, instructional materials, and the students themselves (Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Murphy, 2005).

Contemporary Concepts of Teacher Leadership

Teacher leadership conceptualized as a form of distributed leadership does not simply assume roles, tasks, or positions. Teacher leadership emerges because of learning problems within a specific context and seeks solutions through formal as well as informal leadership roles. According to Lieberman and Miller (2004), teacher leadership is

...about teachers who take leadership in their school, whether formally or informally, and learn how to turn educational policy into constructive practice. It is about building a new
view of teaching and community. It is about building a professional ethos that respects diversity, confronts differences, represents sensitivity to and engagement with the whole life of students and the adults who teach them. (p. 13)

After reviewing 140 studies related to teacher leadership spanning two decades, York-Barr and Duke (2004) developed a model for teacher leadership describing teacher leadership in a context of support that values teacher leaders as teachers and for their leadership capacity. In the York-Barr and Duke model, teacher leadership is oriented toward learning, and its work is valued, visible, negotiated, and shared. Teacher leadership accomplishes its means through a focus on teaching and learning, trusting and constructive relationships, and through formal an informal points of influence. The targets of teacher leadership influence include individuals, teams or groups, and the organization and its culture. The outcomes it seeks are improved teacher learning and practice. The ultimate goal is improved student learning outcomes (see Appendix E).

Contemporary teacher leadership places student learning rather than teaching at the center. Spillane (2006) reminds us that “Teaching practice sometimes fails to produce student learning; nonetheless it is still teaching” (p. 11). In a broader sense people can perceive actions as leadership even lacking evidence that those actions actually influence change. Central to leadership are influence and change, but evidence is sometimes lacking as a criteria supporting either. Similarly, evidence of student learning is likewise sometimes placed in a secondary role or is lacking altogether when identifying quality teaching. However, the concept of teacher leadership inextricably links improved instructional practice with improved student learning. It includes a professional disposition that insists on improving practice to improve student learning outcomes. Teacher leadership assumes responsibility for designing instruction as well as for learning outcomes. It is not simply the technical delivery of instruction (Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Murphy, 2005; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).
New conceptualizations about teacher leadership provide hope for school improvement (Smylie, et al., 2002). Teacher leadership includes, but goes beyond the scope of the teacher leading students in a classroom. It conceptualizes teachers empowered within a culture of learning, taking power and authority from pedagogical expertise, and focusing on improving instruction and student learning. It involves formal leaders and systems that support teachers in these kinds of activities and learning. It is not about creating more layers of bureaucratic management. It should not be about taking the power of individual teaching away from the classroom teacher (Murphy, 2005; Smylie, et al., 2002; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Teacher leadership now focuses on teachers as leaders, not only for instructional change, but also in the realm of organizational change (Smylie, et al., 2002). York-Barr and Duke (2004) define teacher leadership as “the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of school communities to improve teacher practice and pedagogical knowledge and skills with the aim of increased student learning and achievement” (York-Barr & Duke, 2004, p. 288).

Lieberman and Miller (2004) have identified three broad categories or themes in the literature about teacher leadership that include (1) roles and organizational realities, (2) learning in practice, and (3) teacher leadership and reshaping school culture. First, the focus on teacher leadership as specific roles has taken several paths that fit into purposes such as change agent or quasi-administrator. The bureaucratic character of schools presents obstacles to teachers attempting to perform in these roles. The egalitarian culture in schools contributes to a lack of incentives for teachers to assume new roles and there is sometimes resistance among teachers to embrace or become involved in reform efforts. Furthermore, teachers are sometimes given responsibilities within a new role but as quasi-professionals are given little or no authority to
pursue a course of change. Furthermore, their leadership is forced to be technical and scripted rather than professional and adaptive. Teachers are too often left to their own personal resources of time, relationships, and influence in order to accomplish goals and tasks. Real support is needed for this new form of teacher leadership to become a reality that permits the kind of collaborative and transformational learning about educational practice that can improve teaching practice as well as student learning outcomes (2004).

Next, another body of scholarship in the area of teacher leadership explores how teachers learn new roles and practices (Lieberman & Miller, 2004). Professionals learn by doing the work and reflecting on it. Although they are taught theories and skills most of what teacher leaders need to know is learned in the process of performing work. Learning in practice is now viewed as fundamental to teacher leadership. This is referred to as reflective practice whereby knowledge is created rather than acquired and applied. Learning is not transmission of knowledge, but rather the discovery of knowledge. The practice of reflective learning demands a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) in which learning is both social and collective and happens through experience and practice. Collegial relationship and networks of practice are essential to ongoing development of a teacher leader (2004).

The third theme is working to reshape the organization and culture of schools (Lieberman & Miller, 2004). This involves an ambitious new view of the profession in which relationships, meaning, and conditions are transformed. Fundamentally, this work strives to move against a bureaucratic system toward one where members are working together as a cohort rather than as individuals distributing the professional work of leadership among the teaching force of a school (Fullan, 2006). It involves building professional communities in which teachers have open dialogue about students, learning problems, curricular and pedagogical approaches to make
changes together, to teach one another, and commit to collective discussion and action with their peers and colleagues.

Lieberman and Miller (2004) also identify three promising new roles for teachers as leaders that are notably not administrative in nature. They are: (a) researcher, (b) scholar, and (c) mentor or coach. A teacher as researcher generates knowledge that is local, contextual, and immediate. A teacher as scholar expands the researcher role to include making work public, amenable to critique, and passing on to others within the contexts of expertise, credibility, and influence rather than power, authority, and control. A teacher as mentor or coach is viewed with some caution. It can easily become a quasi-administrative role transmitting predetermined scripts of one right way determined and sanctioned by authorities removed from the context of particular classrooms. However, if this third role of mentor or coach supports new teachers in the field to instill cultural norms of learning and inquiry into practice it is a viable teacher leadership role.

A learning culture is essential to the process of teacher leadership. The kind of dynamic knowing that makes a difference in practice requires people who are fully engaged in the processes of learning and creating knowledge (Wenger, 1998). Leadership is not role bound, but found in the relationships that exist among present roles (Ogawa & Bossert, 1995). York-Barr and Duke (2004) find that “one of the clearest effects of teacher leadership is growth and learning among the teacher leaders themselves. Learning and leading are viewed as inseparable” (p. 259). Smylie, et al., (2002) claim, “we see that school improvement may be better served by teacher leadership that does not act alone but is part of a broad system of leadership influences and tasks performed by multiple actors” (p. 181).
A recent study of 81 schools supported by the Educational Foundation of Clark County Nevada draws conclusions and provides a new frame for understanding teacher leadership (Reeves, 2008). This study concluded that,

...teachers not only exert significant influence on the performance of students, but they also influence the performance of other teachers and school leaders. Moreover, educators were more likely to be influenced by the professional practices and action research of their peers than they were to be influence by journal articles or undergraduate or graduate courses. (p. 2)

The author points out that “the most important finding of the study… is the direct observation of the professional practices of teacher by teachers must become the new foundation of professional development” (p. 3). The teacher leadership framework described by Reeves is one “in which teacher researchers will ask important questions, conduct investigations, discern inferences, and share their wisdom with colleagues” (p. 9). He explains,

This framework is a process that recognizes a challenge, proceeds to research, the results of which stimulate reflection and reinforcement, and critically, becomes the filter for action rather than a “fact-free” debate in which personal preferences, traditions and opinions not only take precedence over evidence but also prevent a rational discussion of the evidence from taking place. Rejection of the “fact-free” debate for a return to the research drawing board is the resilience, which is the essence of learning organizations. (p. 27)

Reeves (2008) appeals to us by asking, “Is my present practice as effective as I think it is?” He goes on to say, “As teachers we must be willing to confront this question every day of our professional lives if teacher leadership is to become a reality rather than a slogan” (p. 50).

Marzano (2007) states that the “one factor that surfaced as the single most influential component of an effective school is the individual teachers within that school” (p. 1). Earlier studies concluded a diminished importance of the school and teachers in student achievement, pointing to the role of demographics as the fundamental key to student achievement (Reeves, 2008). However, “teacher practice is not only important but also significantly greater in
influencing student achievement than student demographic characteristics” (2008, p. 6). Reeves also says,

When we expect that we have an impact on student achievement, we are right. When we expect that we are impotent, we are also right. When school leaders perceive that teachers are the predominant influence on student achievement students and teachers alike rise to those expectations. (p. 7-8)

Reeves further claims that, “Networks of teacher leaders, not hierarchical communication, will be essential for the next school change initiative” p. 22).

The Future for Teacher Leadership

Traditional leadership models are insufficient for the nature and purpose of schools. New conceptualizations of leadership, including teacher leadership, bring hope for improving schools and student achievement (Elmore, 2002). There are dangers and cautions in the way forward for teacher leadership (Elmore, 2005; Murphy, 2005). Leadership theory is evolving to include new models, but the culture of schools will need to change in order to support the new forms of leadership (Elmore, 2006; Fullan, 2005; Sergiovani, 2005). There is still much to learn about the role of teacher leadership in improving schools and student learning (Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Murphy, 2005). Teachers are becoming recognized as the predominant influence on student achievement, and teacher leaders will be essential for schools to change (Reeves, 2008).

Moreover, the voices of teacher leaders are absent from the conversation about teacher leadership (Murphy, 2005).

Leadership to improve teaching and learning in schools is distributed, complex, situational, and often occurs without formal leadership authority. Traditional leadership studies are lacking because they do not fully address the dimensions and dynamics of the leadership that exists in schools. Many of the more recent conceptualizations of educational leadership such as distributed and teacher leadership describe collegial, reciprocal, and relational processes spread
over the organization and situation rather than the traditional leader-follower role based (Elmore, 2002). According to some who write about teacher leadership, the research is descriptive rather than explanatory (Patterson & Marshall, 2001; Smylie, et al., 2002; York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Witzier, et al., 2003). Several studies discuss and analyze the roles and characteristics of teacher leadership, but much of the research has remained largely focused on leadership as formal teacher leadership positions, containing argument and rationale more than evidence of effects such as improved instructional practice and student achievement (Gronn, 2002; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

In order to realize the hope that new ideas about teacher leadership bring, school cultures must change such that teaching becomes more professionalized (Elmore, 2000). Schools need structures that are conducive to communities of learning (Wenger, 1998). Furthermore, schools need to support a culture of responsibility for professional learning and for achievement of all students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In these kinds of educational settings, teachers will assume both formal and informal leadership roles in the perspective of distributed leadership as the processes of leadership flow through a network of roles (Elmore, 2005; Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Spillane, 2006). Reeves (2008) states that, “networks of teacher leaders, not hierarchical communication, will be essential for the next school change initiative” (p.22).

There is danger that teacher leadership may lead to more “loose-coupling,” or that a shifting of the power of control from management to teachers will occur (Elmore, 2005; Murphy, 2005). Teacher leadership in the form of increased power to the teacher in the classroom will not work if it creates more “loose-coupling,” that is independence of purpose and accountability along with a lack of transparency necessary for professional learning. However, if teacher leadership further strips the power of the teacher to make judgments and take action in the
classroom, teachers will lose more than they will gain and so will students. On the other hand, in spite of all the discussion of the negative aspects of bureaucratic structures and control, they represent the glue that holds the system together, offer stability to keep the system moving toward common purposes, and provide accountability to those purposes (Murphy, 2005). Risk is real that teacher leadership will, if informed more from administrative rather than pedagogical perspectives, result in teacher leader roles that are administrative as seen in prior conceptualizations and applications of teacher leadership (Murphy, 2005). So that distributed forms of teacher leadership do not become vehicles to sustain current obstacles to improving schools and student learning outcomes, the need for caution and further study is evident (Murphy, 2005).

A problem with studying teacher leadership is that it is no longer conceived within a traditional leadership framework. School leadership, including teacher leadership, is no longer viewed as being dependent upon the qualities and behaviors displayed by individuals. Neither is it viewed as dependent upon roles with formal authority, or without consideration of the cultural contexts of the school (Daft, 1999; Gronn, 2002; Marion, 2002; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Considering the role of authority related to leadership reveals interdependence between leaders and followers (Heifetz, 1994). Instead of workers serving the interests of the organization, following the directives given by those with authority from the organization, reciprocity and interdependence exist among and between members, roles, and the organization itself. Leadership in education, including K-12 schools, involves these multidimensional processes openly, intentionally, and also inadvertently (Sergiovani, 2000).

The concept of distributed leadership, within which much of the conceptualization of teacher leadership now resides, is not a prescription for actions or roles, but a description of
leadership as interactions among and between roles and individuals stretched across the organization over time (Spillane, 2005). The context of leadership may have as much or more to do with the phenomenon of leadership as the character, position, or authority of any individual or role. The cultural dimensions of a school present critical considerations for improving schools and student achievement (Elmore, 2006; Fullan, 2005; Sergiovani, 2005). The role of teachers in that culture is important since these are the people with the most direct link to influence and support student learning and achievement (Elmore 2005). The complexities surrounding contemporary conceptualizations of leadership demand a holistic research methodology, one that accounts for the unique and diverse interplay of influences as the phenomenon of distributed teacher leadership is explored (Murphy, 2005).

There is no consistent or clear understanding of the practice and purposes of teacher leadership—how it can be cultivated, why it emerges, or what influences it can have on a school and student performance. Teachers who have influenced educational practice, and have shown ways to improve student achievement within the contexts where they work, may give us a basis to formulate useful conceptualizations of teacher leadership and draw a tighter understanding of the role of teachers within a distributed understanding of school organization and leadership (Murphy, 2005). There is little evidence about the ways that teacher leadership in a distributed context functions in schools and what outcomes it can produce. We know relatively little about the practical application of specific mechanisms by which collegial interactions operate to the benefit of student learning. Moreover, the voices of teachers are nearly absent in the literature about teacher leadership, demanding a research agenda that will broadcast their voices and expose their perspectives (2005).
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

This study is a qualitative, heuristic inquiry. Its purposes are two-fold. First, the study explored the lived experiences of four teacher leaders working in one comprehensive high school in a district where I am the superintendent. In keeping with heuristic research, a second purpose for the study was to learn from the experiences of the teacher leaders to inform my actions, as superintendent, in order to help the school district develop structures and resources that would support the work of these and other current and emerging teacher leaders.

Specifically, the study addresses these questions: (a) What are the teacher leaders’ personal and professional histories, qualities, and dispositions? (b) What is the nature and purpose of the work of these teacher leaders? (c) What are the contextual elements of the school district that either support or create challenges for the work of these teacher leaders? (e) What is the impact of the work of these teacher leaders? (f) What lessons can be drawn from the work of the teacher leaders to inform the actions of the superintendent and improve the structures and processes within the district in order to support and encourage the work of teacher leaders striving to improve instruction and student learning?

The study was conducted within the complex, naturalistic, contextual, and social realities of the teaching and learning environment of a single public high school, for which a qualitative approach is best suited (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Hackmann, 2002; Stringer, 2007; Woolcott, 2005). A qualitative approach is most suitable in this case because the phenomena being examined have emerged from the contextual realities that are unique to the site and situation. Therefore, the results of this study are not necessarily transferable to another context or situation.
Heuristic Inquiry

Heuristic inquiry (from the Greek *heuriskein* – meaning to discover or find) is discussed at length by Moustakas (1990). According to Moustakas “the heuristic process is a way of being informed, a way of knowing” (p. 10). Heuristic research suggests that the investigator has a “direct, personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated and is present throughout the process” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 14). Moustakas (1990) argues that questions and methodology in heuristic research flow out of inner awareness, meaning, and inspiration. “Heuristics is a way of engaging in scientific search through methods and processes aimed at discovery; a way of self-inquiry and dialogue with others aimed at find the underlying meanings of important human experiences” (p. 15). Moustakas further explains,

Heuristic inquiry is a process that begins with a question or problem which the researcher seeks to illuminate or answer. The question is one that has been a personal challenge and puzzlement in the search to understand one’s self and the world in which one lives. The heuristic process is autobiographical, yet with virtually every question that matters personally there is also a social—and perhaps universal—significance. (p. 15)

Moustakas outlines six phases that make up the basic heuristic research design. These phases include initial engagement, immersion into the topic and question, incubation, illumination, explication, and culmination of the research in a creative synthesis.

In a study by Etherington (2004), “Heuristic Research as a Vehicle for Personal and Professional Development,” heuristics is described as a reflexive methodology. Etherington explains, “reflexive methodology’s seem to be close to the hearts and minds of practitioners who value using themselves in all areas of their practice (including research) and who also value transparency in relationships” (p. 48). “Heuristic inquiry, Moustakas (1990) claims “requires a passionate, disciplined commitment to remain with a question intensely and continuously until it is illuminated or answered” (p. 15). “Heuristic inquiry requires us to have personal connection
with the topic of inquiry, which inevitably leads to ‘self examination, significant personal learning and change’” (Stiles, cited in Etherington, 2004, p. 49). My personal interest and involvement in the study as an educational practitioner are what drew me to an heuristic approach. I am intensely interested in learning about educational practice that aims to improve the lives of students. In addition, I continue to pursue the development of my own personal and professional understanding and practice as an educator. The relevance of teacher leadership to my practice as an educator was a strong consideration in choosing the heuristic approach and to choose participants with whom I share a context and engage in work.

Portraiture and Action Research Influences on the Study

This study also incorporates aspects of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 2002) in order to portray, from their own perspective, the dispositions, purposes, means and context of the four teacher leader participants. Portraiture as action research (Hackmann, 2002; Stringer, 2007) and case study (Creswell, 1998, 2003) can also be identified as influences on the methodology of this study. As case study, it focuses on a specific situation, specifically the emergence of a team of teacher leaders who collaborated to improve student achievement. As action research, this study explores a project as it was developing in the participants’ work place.

In addition, as action research, the study aims to bring about learning, understanding, and implementation of solutions to challenges faced in the daily work lives of the participants, including me as the researcher (2007).

Interviewing (Seidman, 1998) is the primary source of data. A constant comparison method of data analysis was used (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003b; Dye, et al., 2000; Lincoln and Guba cited in Dye, et al., 2000), as well as an integrated portraiture analysis described by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (2002). That is, analysis is ongoing throughout the data
collection process and recorded in memos and journal notes. These reflective analyses became part of the data for the study.

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1998) introduced portraiture as a form of qualitative research and later described the methodology in depth (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 2002). At the time of this study, a number of examples of portraiture research are represented in the literature. However, few researchers have written as extensively about portraiture as a methodology as Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis. Hackmann (2002) is a notable exception to the lack of reflective writing on the methodology. He expresses his rationale for the use of portraiture as a legitimate and useful methodology for action research in education.

According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (2002), portraiture research represents the blending of aesthetic representation with scientific rigor. Wolcott (2005) and Dixson (2005) also describe artistic or aesthetic metaphors for qualitative research. The metaphor of portraiture, as developed by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (2002), is one of a painter painting a portrait of an individual in which the researcher and actors voices are blended together. It becomes a process in which the roles of researcher and participant are blurred, resulting in elements of self-portrait or auto-ethnography (Hackmann, 2002). The researcher’s experience and bias are made explicit, in fact exploited, in the shaping of the portrait (Hackmann, 2002). In addition, the researcher is searching for goodness, exploring success rather than failure (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 2002). The value of portraiture research to education is based on the assumption that educators can learn more, and gain more value from, studies of success than failure (Hackmann, 2002). Finally, the call for including the voices of teachers in the conversation about teacher leadership (Murphy, 2005) led this study toward
portraiture because, as a research approach, portraiture seeks to include the “insider’s voice” and searches for “dissonant perspectives” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 2002).

Action research is a systematic approach to investigate and to find effective solutions to problems confronted in daily professional practice (Stringer, 2007). At the time of this study, I was the superintendent for the school district. A team of teacher leaders joined with me to explore their efforts to improve student achievement. As action research, this study looks for solutions to be applied in the local situation. Hackmann (2002) claims that portraiture is in essence a form of action research. As such, rather than seeking problems to fix, portraiture as action research searches for what is good and what works within a given situation and context. Essentially, we have sought to expose and describe the effective work of this team of teacher leaders rather than exploring a research problem. The study looks for potential solutions and effective strategies that exist in practice.

Site and Participant Selection

The teacher leaders chosen to participate in this study each are women who were purposefully chosen because they are teachers who assumed leadership in their school through their own independent initiative. They were also chosen because their leadership converged around a specific problem and because of the collaboration that developed among them as they worked together. Each brought to the work unique talents and proficiencies contributing to the leadership needed to address the problem they had identified. The target of their collaboration was improving student achievement among a group of identified students; however, their collaboration eventually targeted their own capacity and the capacity of the school and school district to respond more effectively to the learning problems they had identified. The teachers were not appointed to formal positions from which to carry out their work, they were not
directed or assigned to work on the problem, and they were not offered extra compensation for their efforts. In other words, their leadership emerged naturally among them as they identified a need in their school and took responsibility to address it. Throughout their work together, they collaborated among themselves, with other educators, and with administrators in their school and district. They undertook their leadership work without preconceived notions or knowledge of what their work would entail or with specific solutions in mind. They simply recognized a need and set out to learn ways they could address it.

This study explores the work of teacher leaders who are working with low performing high school students within a high performing high school. Fullan (2005) and Elmore (2006) offer different perspectives on what can be learned from schools at the extremes of performance. Each of these authors caution that, without a deep understanding of the context and situation, drawing conclusions from and giving credit for changes in performance can be misleading. This study takes place in a high performing school in Washington State. This designation of high performance is based on a variety of data discussed later in this section. The implication of me as the superintendent for the school district where the study takes place will also be discussed in this section.

The school where this study takes place is fictitiously referred to in this study as Three Rivers High School located in the town of Three Rivers, Washington. It is the only public high school within the district. It consists of grades 9 through 12, with enrollment of approximately 700 students. The high school is part of a public school district comprised of grades K-12 that also has three K-5 elementary schools, and one 6-8 middle school. The district-wide student population is approximately 2250 students. There is a non-white population of 22% that is made up of about 11% Asian, about 4% each Black and Hispanic students, and just over 1% Native
American. The population of students qualifying for the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program is just over 26%. The special education population is just under 10%. English Language Learners make up about 2.4% of the student population. The District employs about 125 teachers with an average experience of nearly 13 years, over 70% hold a Master’s Degree, and over 10% have earned National Board Certification (Washington State Report Card, n.d.; U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

The major population of the district resides in a small rural town surrounded by major agricultural production primarily for the export of wheat, legumes, and other grains. It includes a major research land-grant university. The municipal and county governments, educational services, health care and social assistance, agriculture, higher education, construction, and wholesale trade, account for most of the economic activity within the county and district boundaries (MRSC, n.d.). The population of the town, including university students, is about 26,860 within a county that reports a population of 42,700 (n.d.). The university enrolls about 18,690 students (WSU, 2008). Although the town is small, it is the largest within the county (n.d.). Additionally, another land grant research university is located less than ten miles away in a neighboring state and within a town slightly larger in population than the one in which this study takes place.

There are several indicators of high performance for the high school and the district in general. However, because every student in the state is required to participate, the main indicator of high performance used for this study is the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). The Center for Educational Effectiveness (CEE) has performed longitudinal analysis of WASL data for the State and for individual schools when requested. This school district has obtained its WASL data analysis from CEE, using it for strategic action planning, school
improvement planning, and as evidence that the school in this study can be considered high performing. The percentage of students from the high school in this study who are meeting or exceeding the standard on the WASL has consistently remained above the statewide percentage of student meeting or exceeding the standard as the state-wide scores have also risen (Washington State Report Card, n.d.; see Appendix F). The school has been at the top of its poverty level cohort of schools as determined by eligible students in the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program (see Appendix H). Students are able to retest to raise their scores. However, the results reported here are of the first time testing of tenth graders. The results on the WASL for this school are considerably higher than the State average with 94% meeting or exceeding the standard in reading while 81% met or exceed it statewide. The 10th grade results in writing for the same period are 91% while the statewide average is 84% meeting or exceeding the standard. The 10th grade results in mathematics for the 2006-2007 school-year are 28 percentage points higher than the statewide average with 78% meeting or exceeding the standard. Finally, the statewide average meeting the standard in science is 36% while 67% of this school’s tenth graders met the standard (Washington State Report Card, n.d.; see Appendix F).

The Center for Educational Effectiveness (CEE) participated in conducting a study reported by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI, 2007) in Washington State. This study identified nine characteristics of high-performing schools, schools that were outperforming schools with similar size and demographics. This study became one of the main lenses through which this district assessed its performance and developed plans for improvement.

The participants in this study were four teachers who were purposefully selected as teacher leaders. At the time they were selected to participate in this study, the four teacher
leaders had been working for approximately three years as an informal and voluntary team to improve the achievement of students not meeting the standards on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). The project the four teacher leaders undertook that became a focal point for this study was termed “Fundamentals,” because the instruction targeted students who were lacking the basic or fundamental skills to pass the state exam and meet state learning standards. The teachers self-selected their membership into this team. They were not appointed or compensated to be in a formal teacher leadership role. Their role as teacher leaders and as a team has emerged naturally in response to the context and situation in which they were already working. Consistent with the literature describing teacher leadership (Murphy, 2005; Lieberman & Miller, 2004; York-Barr and Duke, 2004), these teachers demonstrate a focus on student learning and express the measure of their success through improvements in student learning outcomes. They make their practice public; they collaborate and engage in inquiry about their practice. Furthermore, they work to influence the organization and culture of the school toward a learning community with a focus on improving student-learning outcomes.

Two of the teachers participating in this study are English teachers, Rhonda Johns and Suzanne Summers. Suzanne has been an educator for more than 30 years with experience teaching at all grade levels and a variety of subjects at the secondary level. She has been a librarian and briefly an assistant principal in a middle school. Rhonda by contrast has been an English teacher at the high school level for about 4 years. She began teaching soon after college. She originally intended to be a political speechwriter, but found teaching to be an avenue, at least temporarily, to continue to remain close to her interest in English language and literature. The other two teachers in the study, Tammy Thomason and Hazel Shoultes, are both mathematics teachers. Tammy has taught 14 years in three different school districts. She grew up in Three
Rivers where her mother and father, now retired, were also teachers. Tammy also did not originally intend to be a teacher, but now says she cannot think of anything else she would want to do. Hazel has been an educator for 25 years also teaching in two other school districts before coming to Three Rivers High. Her teaching has stayed close to mathematics, branching out for a time to teach computer programming and literacy. Hazel also served as an assistant principal for a short time and reported that she learned she did not like to be in that role. A table showing some of the characteristics of the four participants can be found in Appendix C.

Beginning sometime in the 2004-2005 school year, Tammy and Hazel publicly expressed their concern that students who were not meeting the required state standards in math would not be eligible for a diploma in 2008. They initiated research to identify the students and analyze their academic performance history. From that study, they developed a profile of the students and began to seek curriculum materials and instructional approaches to address the needs these students presented that are different than the majority of students who were meeting the standards. They presented their findings to the school board, district and school administrators, and their instructional colleagues. During those presentations, they acknowledged deficiencies in their own knowledge and understanding of diverse learners and in their own teaching approach in relation to the needs of the identified students. They expressed the need and desire to learn and develop their skills further in order to reach this student group. Sometimes using their own time and resources, these teachers took it upon themselves to develop curriculum and plan lessons for which there were limited and in some cases no printed curricula available. Consistent with the descriptive literature about teacher leadership these teacher leaders assumed responsibility for students’ learning, for their own professional development, and for sharing their learning and knowledge with colleagues and the system as a whole (Danielson; 2006; Lieberman and Miller,
They acknowledged that they were lacking the skills and resources to meet the needs of the identified students. They made their learning and practice public and visible and took steps to inspire and influence colleagues and formal leaders to assist in their work. Their influence has encouraged others to recognize that the system and its members need to take more responsibility for student learning, especially for those students who struggle to achieve. The Fundamentals program developed and was imitated as a result of these initial influences by Hazel and Tammy.

Soon after the math teachers began to collaborate during the 2004-2005 school year, Suzanne and Rhonda, language arts teachers at the time, also responded to address the needs of students who were not meeting standards. Rhonda and Suzanne’s entrée into Fundamentals program was not initially as spontaneous and visible at the first two teachers. However, over time their work took on leadership characteristics similar to those demonstrated by the two math teachers. Rhonda and Suzanne collaborated, recognizing that many of the students that were struggling with language were the same students who were struggling in mathematics. They also made their insights and learning public, have conducted professional development activities, and have initiated their own professional learning and development. They developed specific courses and interventions aimed at the learning needs of the identified students.

The four teachers formed an informal community of professional learners consistent with many of the principals of “professional learning communities” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, 2004) and “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998). All four of these teachers consistently worked extra hours during the school year and throughout their summers, even when extra compensation was not available or offered to them. In addition to their regular classroom planning, grading, and reporting, they worked to identify and create materials and strategies to
help them help underachieving students learn and perform better. They read research and literature about helping struggling learners and about learning in general. They attended and facilitated workshops and conferences, conferred with colleagues, and searched for resources to provide materials and time to learn and develop so that they can offer the struggling learners a different approach. Committing their own resources of time and money in order to develop their knowledge and skills as teachers, these teacher leaders have demonstrated an extraordinary quality of assuming responsibility for learning, both their own and their students’.

Having described the positive attributes of these teachers as leaders is not to say that they are otherwise atypical teachers. These teachers face and express being discouraged, frustrated, and at times wanting to “throw up their hands” and give up on some students. They express frustrations with the barriers they and their students face that are seemingly out of their control and the reach of available interventions. However, one quality that helps them overcome these normal discouraging feelings appears to be a willingness and ability to be open about it and to seek support from their colleagues and trusted administrators. They express an ultimate optimism that, if they are able to learn more, to understand more, and are able to secure more resources, there is little they cannot accomplish to improve student achievement.

Data Collection and Analysis

The primary method of data collection for this study was in-depth individual interviews with the four teacher leaders and a follow-up focus group interview. Initially, an interview guide developed from the research questions (see Appendix D) gave direction for the interviews. These initial interviews were conducted in the school setting and in the teachers’ work places, primarily in their classrooms. This was by design to minimize the impact of my position on the participants and the interviews. Moreover, initial interviews were conducted in the summertime and outside
the school day to take advantage of the more relaxed and potentially more reflective atmosphere. This was intended to further limit the impact that our different roles might have on the data. As expected this semi-structured interview protocol developed into informal conversational interviewing as the participant and researcher developed an increasing rapport and ease with the conversations (Seidman, 1998; Woolcott, 2005). Follow-up interviews took place to enrich the data, clarify participants’ perspectives, and expand on initial analytical ideas. In addition, following the completion of individual interviews, a focus group interview took place to expand and triangulate the data (1998). Only three of the four participants were able to participate in the focus group interview. However, the data generated from this interview was especially useful for clarifying earlier points and reinforcing identified themes from the individual interviews. All interviews, both individual and focus group, were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

I also observed the four teacher leaders as they worked in classrooms and participated in meeting and workshops. We continued to have informal conversations throughout the period of the study. As this was an heuristic study, I also kept journal notes as to my learning as the superintendent, actions that were taken as a result of this learning, and observations of various meetings and workshops related to these action. I wrote reflective memos, and constructed graphic organizers regarding observations and thoughts about the interview data, observations of the work of the teacher leaders, and my own work and readings of related literature. Finally, I collected documents related to the actions taken as a result of the study.

Transcripts of the interviews, along with field notes and memos, were read repeatedly to begin analysis of the data. Patterns and themes that emerged from these readings were identified, recorded, and constantly compared in search of those that related to the research purpose and questions (Cresswell, 1998, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003a). My journal notes and reflective
memos were considered part of the research data. The emerging patterns and themes within the data provided a basis to organize it into a palette of concepts that ultimately become the materials with which to develop a portrait of each teacher leader (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 2002). The portraits, presented in Chapter 4, are intended to bring the voices of the teacher leaders forward in the exploration of teacher leadership. Comparison among and between the various identified themes and patterns were continuously made until saturation and additional patterns and themes failed to emerge (Creswell, 2003). The analysis resulted in 19 themes organized in 4 categories as presented in Chapter 5. As an heuristic study, the process of interviewing, observing, reflecting, developing portraits, and analyzing the data was viewed with the potential to inform my actions, as superintendent, helping the school district develop structures and resources to support of the work of these and other emerging teacher leaders. My actions are presented in Chapter 6 along with a conceptual framework of teacher leadership that represents the conclusions of the study.

Ethics and Self as Researcher

Fundamentally, as the researcher, I entered into this project with the disposition to do no harm. It was my intention to learn about teacher leadership, what works to support teacher leadership, to learn more about the good work of a specific teacher leader team, and to learn how I, as the superintendent, can support the work of these teacher leaders as well as other existing and emerging teacher leaders. The participants were given the opportunity for informed consent, including that participation was voluntary and that any time they were free to withdraw from the study. I assumed that the participants agreed to participate because they expected a productive outcome. One potential benefit to the participants is the opportunity to reflect on their professional practice in order to gain insight and direction for their expressed desire for improved
results. In fact, I observed the participants throughout this study acquire insights, information, and strategies from one another. The possibility that the study may reveal even a small insight that might lead to further research, have a positive impact on teaching and learning, or add to the literature in the field of educational leadership for improving student learning, were all constant motivations.

By virtue of entering the situation, I became a more direct part of the context, potentially affecting, and even intending to have an influence on the context. These facts pose some risk to the site and the participants. As researcher, I have committed to be constantly aware and sensitive to this potential. I have kept a sharp eye for evidence of my influence whether positive or negative, and noted it as a part of the data for the study. Generally, the risks to confidentiality are confronted as a matter of a study’s design to prevent placing the participants in jeopardy. Engaging in heuristic inquiry that is imbedded in our daily professional work precluded the presumption that we could fully protect the confidentiality of the participants in this study. Further, by the fact that they were chosen because of their collaboration as a team of teacher leaders, the participants already know each other, and know of each other’s participation in the study. This was especially the case as the teachers participated in the focus group interview. The interactions and the existing relationships among the participants and me as the researcher and superintendent were expected to bring a kind of co-researcher, co-participant character to the study. Finally, the participants agreed to participate in the study after having the risks explained to them and giving their written consent (see Appendix A and B).

Research in Your Own Place

Originally, portraiture research was the intended approach for this study. The reaction of Hackmann (2002) to English’s (2000) critique of portraiture as a research method drew my
attention to the value as well as the pitfalls of conducting a study within a familiar context. As the study began to unfold and as the purpose to learn about my own practice as it related to supporting the work of the teacher leaders become more prominent my role in the study seemed to intensify and the heuristic nature of the study emerged. As such, this study became not about being an observer recording events as they unfold or attempting to minimize the researcher’s influence on the context. Quite the opposite, as the researcher, I became a co-participant, imbedded in the context, and sharing in the search for those things that work to bring success to the work of the participants. The study specifically sought to find solutions to overcome challenges facing the team of teacher leaders as they work together. The research project itself became a part of the context as it is with heuristic as well as action research.

As heuristic inquiry, the study became a means for my own personal and professional growth. As a qualitative study it explored the phenomenon of teacher leadership and included portraiture in order to expose the voices and perspectives of the teacher leaders. At the same time the study included an element of action research to study the work of the teacher leaders in their natural work setting in order to enhance their work, to inform my role as superintendent and instructional leader, and to improve the conditions that support teacher leadership.

For good reasons, many methodologists caution against and some outright reject the idea of research in ones’ own place or setting (Creswell, 2003). Seidman (1998) points to significant pitfalls and discourages doing research with people with whom the researcher already has a relationship, and within contexts in which the researcher works. He warns researchers saying, “My experience is that the easier the access, the more complicated the interview” (p. 34). However, in the case of heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990; Patton, 2002) as well as portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 2002) and action research (Hackmann, 2002; Stringer,
imbedded and deep understanding of the context of the study is implied. The researcher is also a participant. The aims of the study are directed at the participants and researcher alike. Being the researcher in this study and the superintendent of the district where the study took place would generally be considered mutually exclusive. From traditional positivist perspectives, it would be assumed that the two conditions would pose a challenge to the authenticity of data. However, the problem and purpose of this study make portraiture as action research appropriate. The study was conducted in the context of ongoing practice, and, as the researcher, I began with a good understanding of the context and setting. Rapport and knowledge of the work of the participants was established prior to beginning the study. For these reasons, along with the fact that the participants have a strong interest in the topic of the study, the potential for the situation to work to the advantage of the study arguably transcends concerns for conducting study in one’s own place. By acknowledging and confronting these potential pitfalls, and with the persistent involvement and wise guidance from my advisor, being a researcher in this familiar situation enhanced the quality compared to its potential had the study taken place within an unfamiliar context.
CHAPTER 4

TEACHER LEADER PORTRAITS

One of the purposes of this qualitative, heuristic inquiry was to explore the lived experiences of four teacher leaders working in one comprehensive high school in a district where I am the superintendent. The identified teacher leaders’ work focused on improving learning and achievement for a set of students who were identified to be at risk of failing to meet state standards and local graduation requirements. The project the four teacher leaders undertook that became a focal point for this study was termed “Fundamentals,” because the instruction targeted students who were lacking the basic or fundamental skills to pass the state exam and meet state learning standards.

Related to this purpose, the study addressed these questions: (a) What are the teacher leaders’ personal and professional histories, qualities, and dispositions? (b) What is the nature and purpose of the work of these teacher leaders? (c) What are the contextual elements of the school district that either support or create challenges for the work of these teacher leaders? and (d) What is the impact of the work of these teacher leaders? The fifth research question relates to lessons learned from the study and will be addressed in Chapter 6.

To begin to address these questions, this chapter presents individual portraits of the four teacher leaders who participated in this study. The portraits provide a frame through which these teacher leaders, their work, and the context of their work can be viewed. Development of these portraits was an important step in approaching the analysis of the data to be presented in Chapter 5. As discussed in chapter 3, pseudonyms are used throughout this report.
Rhonda Johns

Introducing Rhonda

I’m here for the students. I have to do what I think is right, and at the end of the day for students. There’s a lot more going on for all our students outside the classroom that we can’t even begin to know. It’s not just how the top kids are doing, but how the bottom kids are doing. I think that’s really, really, where the judgment should be.

When I met Rhonda, she impressed me as a take-charge kind of person. She certainly did not seem like the relatively inexperienced teacher she was. Although Rhonda is not very tall—five feet two inches—she has a commanding presence in the way that she carries herself. She seems relaxed, but moves about the school purposefully and with apparent self-assurance. Rhonda can be seen walking with her eyes fixed ahead, appearing to have an important and specific destination to reach. On most days, Rhonda dresses and acts as a stereotypical professional. Occasionally, there are opportunities in a high school to be casual and relaxed and to have fun in the high school, and Rhonda joins in with enthusiasm. Rhonda is a concise communicator who does not waste words in getting her ideas across; she gets to the point. Although Rhonda is in her twenties, young, and has little teaching experience relative to most other teachers in the school, she is respected by her peers. Other teachers seem to have confidence in her as an expert in literature and writing as well as in pedagogical practices.

Rhonda didn’t always have a vision of herself becoming a teacher. She initially had an interest in political speech writing, which came from working with her grandfather, a county commissioner. She later turned her attention to public relations and pursued a degree in English until she got married. She had spent a summer working as a teacher aide in summer school right after graduating from high school, and later, circumstances led her to seek a teaching certification. She says, “I didn’t really set out to become a teacher, but just liked the subject so much, it was a good avenue to be able to stay with English and literature.”
Rhonda told me that her mother, a kindergarten teacher with a Masters Degree in literacy, has been a significant influence on her as a teacher: “My mom, seeing where kids start off, just having those conversations.” Rhonda explains that she learned from her mother and her master teacher that high school teachers need to be reading teachers as well as content teachers. She observes that high school teachers are not typically trained to “know how kids learn to read, so how can we keep teaching them to read harder things?”

Rhonda experienced what she calls burn-out during her third year of teaching. “Last year was rough—burn-out rough! I’m getting back to the basics that really focus on the lesson planning... being creative for me and the students...” She began working with students outside the classroom in extra-curricular activities. She explains, “There were times ...when I was ...just not having fun with the kids.” She could tell that the fun in working with students was slipping away and she says that, “My energy was just zapped by the end of the day.” She says she needed to “switch some things up.”

Rhonda says she would like to influence policy at the state level some day because she perceives an understanding gap between the state policy makers and the realities of high schools and classrooms. She explains that at the state level that there is a high need for high school experienced people: “I think they are missing the point at the high school level, or how to reach the high schools.” Rhonda is exasperated by the missed communication and the missed professional development opportunities that occur sometimes simply because of timing. She remarks on the state office of the superintendent of public instruction (OSPI): “They don’t even understand ...how high schools need to be communicated with ... rather than e-mail that’s ten hours too late. Their concept of school is through the elementary school lens.” Rhonda explained that the context for changing instructional practice is different in the high school than at other
levels, and that the unique character, structures, and culture of high schools have to be understood by policy makers in order to support changes at that level.

In contrast to the other teachers I interviewed for this study, Rhonda envisions herself as a school leader and at some time in the future leaving teaching for an administrative role. She describes her commitment to being a leader that does the right things for students. She believes strongly in doing what needs to be done, even if it is difficult and results in making others uncomfortable. She explains that she views taking leadership as a “willingness to try something new and then ... to give it a try and see where it’s going, and organize others, and talk it up cause there’s resistance.” She talks about what it feels like when other teachers resist as she or other teachers try to lead change. She explains, “Well, I’m not in it for them. I’m here for the students. I have to do what I think is right and at the end of the day for students.”

Rhonda says, “I don’t see myself teaching for 30 years in the classroom. Interacting with students and in the field of education, yes, but ... at some point in teaching you kind of become stagnant.” She goes on to say that eventually she will want the option to do other things. Rhonda speaks about the satisfaction she gets from taking responsibility for initiating and being accountable for the outcomes, for assuming leadership. She tries to explain, “I think it is the challenge and the change. I think it has a lot to do with my confidence.” She says she seeks to be a leader in the school “because I can.” She goes on to clarify, “I’m a firm believer, if you’re going to complain about the system you better be willing to change it or you better be willing to contribute or you better have ideas.” She laughs out loud as she says that she “can’t just sit around and bitch and moan about what’s going on and then not try to do something. Kind of put up or shut up,”
Rhonda explains that other teachers come to her for professional advice: “They come to me when they have questions, teacher questions, how to deal with this situation or with a student, how to deal with a particular parent…” She understands that she has something to offer other teachers. “Maybe they had good advice the first time so they came back for more,” she beams. Rhonda reflects on what it is that may cause other teacher to come to her: “I think part of it is being a good listener and they know that what they say stays here. I think it’s listening and helping to work through a problem, what I do with my students, too.”

Rhonda agreed to join the Fundamentals team while she was a first-year, part time teacher. She didn’t really volunteer, but it was an opportunity she seized upon. One reason was to more firmly establish her position in the school district, but also, she saw herself as well prepared and suited for the challenge: “It was kind of a little bit of both,” she says, “there was no way I was going to say, ‘no, I don’t want to teach Fundamentals,’ but, I was up for it, too.” She tells me that being a recent university graduate she was familiar with teaching the state standards, the Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs): “At the time I was the only one who had come out of college where they had actually talked about the EALRs. In addition, she was prepared to help students past the state assessment, the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL): “So, I think I was the one at the time that was best to deal with getting them up to the WASL.”

When Rhonda decided to work on the project, she connected with another English teacher, Suzanne, with whom she began to talk “immediately, ‘cause there was nothing to help us.” The state had set the standards and told teachers and students “this is what you need to know and be able to do.” However, there were few practical and useful materials or guidance for how teachers were going to help those students achieve who are significantly below the level of the
standards. She recounted, “The first thing we did is got a bunch of books and approaches on how to really teach students how to read at the high school level.” The teachers knew there were things that would help students become better readers, “basic things that we latched onto … we had to be creative and use what we had.” As the Fundamentals project developed, Rhonda points out that the teachers divided the tasks and duties of the work among them: “Suzanne is the one going out and putting on professional development.” Rhonda describes her role in contrast to Suzanne saying, “I’m very much the paper work, administration, and coordinator … checking on the funds ... looking at the numbers and trying to come up with a system, where it’s not just lip service.”

From the beginning, the work of the Fundamentals project was rewarding and satisfying to Rhonda: “The first year I taught Fundamentals... I probably could have sold those kids a bridge in Arizona. They would have jumped on it and worked as hard as possible.” However, as time went on challenges emerged for her: “...last year there was no selling. There was a total reluctance, it was complete polar opposites.” The team had decided to restructure the classes, grouping them by their level of demonstrated proficiency toward the standards. This put freshmen and sophomore students in class together. The freshmen were “too disruptive, too needy, and too, I don’t know, not willing to try or anything.” The group dynamics simply didn’t work as well and the teachers realized they needed a different approach.

I asked her how the teachers figured out what instruction the students needed and Rhonda explains that they developed their own diagnostic assessments: “The very first full day of school I give them a reading test that I made and a writing sample. The writing sample really tells me, personally, more than anything where they’re at. Rhonda explains, “We had two goals, one that they would pass the WASL, and two, that they would be able to go into regular English class the
next year.” Rhonda says that, working with this group of students, she has to think intentionally about her teaching; “you have to be very aware of every step,” Rhonda says, “You can’t take anything for granted. ...you have to be very aware and very patient.”

Rhonda describes her peers as dedicated to being the best they can be: “Just about everyone here wants to be the best teacher that they can possibly be. They are very much here for students.” Rhonda says, however, that some teachers continue to perceive their job as simply presenting content. Others, she claims, have accepted the responsibility to find ways to inspire students’ desire to learn. She says that “nobody sets out to be a bad teacher” and they think “what they are doing is the best.” She claims that what teachers need is the “willingness to maybe change and be the best teacher that you can.” She admits that this is harder than simply planning and presenting lessons day after day. Rhonda says that she and the other teacher leaders have been working to help other teachers learn strategies that will help more of their students learn and achieve in “regular classes.” Rhonda pointed out that the Fundamentals teachers “might have fifteen or twenty strategies that work, but if each year teachers in all content areas tried two to three this year and four or five next year it will start to build.” She said, “I hope that is where we are going, but I don’t think it is going there fast enough.” Rhonda also explains that the school is “pretty departmentalized,” and there is never enough time for “collaborative interactions; there’s never enough time in teaching.”

Tammy Thomason

*Introducing Tammy*

I got into education and it was the right thing to do. When it is just me working with students and that light bulb goes on, those are the most rewarding moments... I think we have some pretty amazing kids. The non-traditional student, the students at risk... I think it’s just part of my nature, you know, caring about people, and wanting to help.
Tammy is a friendly person who has a quiet but confident presence. She is tall and slender and appears fit and energetic, a person who you might expect to be physically active, maybe a runner. Tammy is one who steps in to help when a job needs to be done. She looks out for others interests as well as her own, and considers the good of the group when faced with choices and decisions. She exemplifies the notion of team player. In her thirties, Tammy has been a teacher now for fifteen years. She seems eager to continue to learn and improve her practice, and takes an interest and participates in making conditions better for the school.

When Tammy started college she decided she would not become a teacher. Maybe it was because her mother was a teacher, maybe because she simply wanted to experience something else after 12 years in school. In any case, she says, “I remember saying that I would never ever be a teacher because my mom is a teacher. She struggles to find the precise reasons: “I don’t know exactly why I said that; probably because it didn’t pay enough. As a student you think, school, I just can’t wait to be out of school, and visions of something different.” On the other hand her mother was a positive role model: “...my mom was clearly happy with what she was doing.”

“So, I started out in college with a business major,” Tammy says, “accounting, pre-law... was my intention. I got into my third semester of accounting and was working part-time for a local accountant, and just realized this wasn’t what I was really wanting to do.” Several times Tammy says she enjoys interacting with people: “I think I missed the personal contact, you know, instead of just sitting there working... pencil and paper... I realized it was the math that I liked.” She says she realized “there would be a need for math teachers and I wanted high school.” Tammy says she does not regret this change of course: “I got into education and it was the right thing to do. It gets frustrating at times, obviously, but when it is just me working with
students and that light bulb goes on, those are the most rewarding moments...” She continues, “I still love what I do ... now I’m on year 14 ... and don’t know what else I would even want to do.”

Tammy connects with students on a personal level: “Hazel told me that she feels that one of my strengths is how I connect with kids... I was really flattered when she said that because, you know, I would hope so.” Tammy finds satisfaction working with students who are struggling in school. A teacher asked her one day, “Why do you want to do this; is this a passion of yours?” Tammy told him that she didn’t know if it is a passion, but she says “I just don’t want these kids to be ignored, or... pushed aside, or written off...” She went on to explain that “...there are kids that ... have some real issues in their lives. It amazes me how some of these kids can even make it to school when they’ve got so much baggage that they are dealing with.”

Where did this passion for kids who struggle to be successful in school originate? Tammy grew up and went to school in Three Rivers. She now reflects back on her own high school days: “...It was a shock to me that I was so sheltered.” She told me that when she was in high school she had not realized there were other kids that didn’t have the advantages she had. She says, “We weren’t rich by any means, but education, it was never a question.” One of the schools Tammy taught at after graduating from college and leaving Three Rivers had a large Hispanic population with a high rate of poverty. She explains, “I started seeing more of what’s going on at home. How they couldn’t come to school because they had to either work or they had to take care of little brother or little sister.” She went on to explain that “mom had to go to work or all these other reasons that were getting in the way of school. It wasn’t because they were lazy or just didn’t want to come to school. It was ... family survival.” Tammy says that this experience made her even more aware of how the context in which a student lives influences a student’s perspective about school and learning. She says that “Three Rivers can be very, uh, it can be
sheltered.” She claims that she “learned a lot from those experiences. It made me want to help those students whether they were going to college or going to work. She says the satisfaction comes to her when she sees the “appreciation ... they don’t say it, but you can see it in the confidence they’re building.”

Tammy says she has grown as a teacher: “I feel like I’ve changed a lot as a teacher.” She claims that you start out and “teach the way you were taught,” and “I’m so different in how I teach now. I’m more of a hands-on [teacher]. I’m trying to find new ways... instead of just the lecture format.” Tammy continued saying, “I graduated from college in ninety-four.” This was a time when the state was beginning to develop curriculum standards called Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs) that later would lead to the state exam, the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). Tammy says that “it seemed like the reform movement was coming and so the push for changing how you teach ... getting away from lecture and making it more meaningful and relevant.” During these early teaching years Tammy says she acquired a focus on students’ learning rather than simply delivering content: “As far as what has influenced me the most? I’d have to say the reform movement and the professional development.”

Tammy says that she values the positive collaborative relationships she has with other teachers: “Having such a collaborative team of math teachers has been really good. I feel like I’ve learned a lot from the people I teach with. Just hearing their perspectives on things, but even going more into specific sharing of ideas.” She explains that the teachers share material they create, and discuss approaches to specific topics or concepts from the textbook. Leading to the development of the Fundamentals classes and since, the teachers have discussions that shape the Fundamentals program and the changes they make to it: “Even if it is just talking, kind of
venting frustrations ... just throw ideas off of them, getting their feedback.” Tammy says that now when the team meets together “we’re trying to think of other options ... working to find a way to reach another student who continues to fail.”

After three years of developing and working with the Fundamentals program, when asked to describe the work and why she got involved with it Tammy says, “I’m trying to think back to how that actually got started.” She continues, “I remember Hazel and I having a conversations about being proactive instead of waiting for students to fail the WASL.” Tammy says that they asked each other, “What can we do when they first come to us to kind of help bring them up to speed a little bit faster instead of waiting for them to fail?” She explains that they “began to use this assessment as a way to find out more precisely where the students were performing.”

Tammy and Hazel sought out materials and ultimately discovered a curriculum designed to help students meet the standards. They obtained training in this selected curriculum and “decided to target students when they came into the high school at the 9th grade.

Then things changed. The diversity of learning expanded dramatically as students with disabilities were transferred from resource rooms into the Fundamentals classes. Tammy says, “Now we have more kids that are five years behind in their math skills. So, that’s kind of, I guess, our next challenge. I feel like we don’t really know what to do anymore.” She said that the frustration keeps coming back to things keep changing: “Our original intention was not for this group of students, so now what?” In order to address these diverse students’ needs, the school began to explore and experiment with web-based distance learning. Tammy says they found that this gave the Fundamentals teachers a new tool to try to help students accelerate their learning: “We’ve kind of jumped on that boat,” Tammy says and goes on to claim, “We’ve found some success with the on-line classes...” Tammy says that because of the individualize nature and
multiple levels of curriculum available with the on-line courses, the teachers are now “able to find a class that is more at the level of a particular student.”

Tammy’s own experience growing up in Three Rivers illustrates the challenges some local families and students face when they are overlooked by others in the community. She observes that students in Three Rivers who are facing problems that impact their learning still go unnoticed: “There is a large percentage of our student population and their parents who are oblivious or they see students as troublemakers. I think we are getting more students with economic hardships than we’ve had before.” She points out that many students who have opportunities are very successful: “...it amazes me what they do. When we give these kids opportunities to do things, and then what they are able to do, it’s amazing. I think it is because of the resources we have within the community and the university.” In addition, she says, “I think we have some pretty amazing kids.”

The high school climate is not always a positive one according to Tammy. She describes a pattern of communication characterized by indirect communication and avoidance that sometimes gives way to a network of gossip, rumors, and informal communication that can be negative to the culture and climate of the school: “I’m the type of person, I don’t like confrontation. I hear the complaining, talking, complaining about things going on.” She admits, “I know I should probably be more assertive. I don’t speak up against it.” She claims there is a “gossipy nature that goes on,” and that she tries “not to get into that.” In addition, Tammy points out a climate of dissatisfaction that persists among the teaching staff: “I sometimes feel like our staff is, we’re never going to be happy. Tammy tells me that the climate was not good with a former principal. She says that the new principal improved the school climate. However, she tells me, the climate began to return to what it was before: “...quickly it’s like they’re never going to
be happy. If people can’t get things the way they want then they just immediately ... this negative vibe.” Tammy indicates that she yearns for people to “try and think more as a whole and see the big picture.” According to Tammy, complexities arising out of the State and Federal reform efforts further contribute to discontent among teachers: “We’re being thrown different—now try this—and then things kind of change a little bit at the state level.” She says there is a feeling that there is too much change too fast, and that policy makers mandating changes don’t seem to realize what impact they are having in schools and on students.

Tammy says that the principal and other administrators are important and can be a positive influence on the culture. She says that the current administrators in the high school “seem to want to include everyone, have everyone participate giving their perspective and input.” Tammy describes the principal an important element in the school culture to bring people together. Because of the principal, she says, “we’ve been given more opportunities to talk.” Tammy describes how the principal has started holding preparation period meetings with small groups of teachers and that “it is nice to hear from other teachers.” She says it is important to have this kind of dialog: “One person’s favorite choice may have some fatal flaw for someone or something else in the school” and that “even though one solution is their own personal favorite, another one that they can live with may be better for the school as a whole.”

Tammy tells me about a period of time in which she experienced “burn-out.” She became frustrated because the target of her work seemed to change before she could even complete a cycle and see if she and the students were making progress: “I thought maybe with one more year, you know, to see if there was a little bit more success...” Feeling somewhat alone in her work, Tammy pointed out that “... people on the staff would rather not worry about those kids.” They seem to say, “It’s not my problem, and unfortunately, they’re glad someone else is doing
it.” Tammy speculates about why teachers resist seeking to improve student learning and student achievement: “I guess because everything is changing so much.”

She exclaims, “I so enjoy working with the kids.” Then her shoulders drop when she says, “but I can tell that the fatigue factor, that it is wearing.” The light coming back to her eyes she says, “I just need to focus on the ones that are moving forward. The kids we can help.” Instead of claiming defeat, when challenged with students learning at the 3rd and 4th grade level, Tammy says, “I think this is where I need more training, ‘cause even though my endorsement says 4-12 math, I don’t feel like I’m qualified to teach elementary math... I’ve never had to do it... that’s not where my experience is.”

Suzanne Summers

Introducing Suzanne

I teach students English. I don’t teach English. When you reverse those two words, it changes all perception of what teaching is all about. A good teacher can go into any subject, excite learning, and bring a passion with them that makes the learning relevant.

I remember when I first met Suzanne. She had recently transferred from the middle school to the high school to be a social studies teacher. At the same time, she had taken on the extra duty job of being the junior class advisor. One of the first things that I saw her do at the high school was to transform the high school commons area for the junior and senior prom. With little more than construction paper, tape, markers, a few strategically placed lights, and maybe a few things from the local craft store, Suzanne and a group of students turned the room into a labyrinth of hallways opening into a ballroom. I saw that when she committed herself to something she could do it with flair.

Suzanne is a veteran teacher of over 30 years who has experience in several different educational roles. She has taught in elementary, middle level, and high school. She has also
served as a librarian and an assistant principal. I remember one fall evening seeing Suzanne at a high school football game dressed up like a football referee, the black striped shirt and all. It was late fall and close to Halloween, but I learned that this was no costume. I am embarrassed to admit, that with the uniform and her hair up in a baseball cap, at first I did not recognize her; I assumed she was one of the “guys.” What I learned is that she is a member of the football officials’ chain crew for the league and she was there to officiate one of the season’s first home football games.

Far from eccentric or unusual, Suzanne readily gets involved and is willing to assume unconventional roles. She is fun loving, pleasant, and friendly with a somewhat “dry” sense of humor. Suzanne seems to have an interest in distinguishing right from wrong. She is willing to confront what she perceives to be injustice. Experience seems to have taught her to be direct and get to the point. While she has learned to accept a certain amount of ambiguity, Suzanne appears comfortable being direct, asking questions, and confronting issues. In doing so, she seems to be sincere in her inquiry rather than confrontational. Suzanne seems to seek answers with an open mind and is willing to question and to be questioned about her own perspectives.

Suzanne describes herself as a “workhorse.” She tells me, she was not among the top students: “I wasn’t an honors student, but I was a hard worker.” She views herself as a hard working classroom teacher, too: “I don’t bring a lot of attention to what I do; I just work hard with the kids. I come to work and do my thing with the kids.”

Growing up, Suzanne describes her family as having been poor: “Although we weren’t very fortunate ... but felt good. I mean, I have a lot of good family memories.” She tells me that she learned to value helping others through her family experiences: “We were always looking out for people that weren’t as fortunate.” Suzanne says, “I really enjoy working with struggling
kids. They remind me a lot of me and my family, you know. I just have a lot of compassion for those kids.”

As a young girl, “my girlfriend and I had this game,” Suzanne says as she reminisces about some of the things that shaped how she now relates to other people. She says they would pretend to “be something different ... about every week.” She says, “I realized that everything I chose ... was mostly to help people.” Suzanne tells me that she was never very “science-minded” growing up. She could not imagine being a nurse. “So, a teacher it was,” she says, and “I knew I wanted to work with people who needed help. And then she reflects back over a full career as a teacher saying, “After all the things I’ve done in the last 30 years here I am right back to English working with kids who struggle ... I’ve always been good with these.”

Even though she described herself as an average student in high school, Suzanne says she developed an inclination for learning: “I loved what I read, and I loved what I wrote. I loved what I learned, or tried to learn.” She continues to be a learner. Speaking about her day in the classroom and the students she teaches, Suzanne explains that at the end of the day she will “go home and think about them and think how … to reach kids that I couldn’t reach the day before.” She goes on explaining, “I spend time on the Internet ... I may think about one or two students ... find something that I haven’t read before,” and she says, “I talk with colleagues,”

Even after 30 years as a teacher, Suzanne continues to learn. She seeks out and attends workshops to learn new teaching and leadership skills: “I love it, and so this spring when I was able to go to the LETRS Conference, I just think I died and went back to teacher heaven.” She invites other teacher into her classroom and is willing to visit and help in the classrooms of others. She facilitates and encourages collaborative learning by conducting workshops in her
school and throughout the district and facilitating book studies among teachers and administrators: “It is encouraging. I had eleven people in that... class I taught this last spring.”

Suzanne engaged with the Fundamentals project as it among the four teacher leaders in this study. She describes how the project began as it became apparent that the state was not going to back down from requiring students to pass the state test, the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) before they can earn a diploma: “About six or seven of us would sit around at lunch. We started sharing stories and looking at WASL scores. The key question emerged for them: “What are we going to do with the kids who don’t pass the WASL?” Some of the high school teachers came to recognize, Suzanne says, that “the buck stops here,” meaning, if students fall behind in earlier grades the consequences will be felt at the high school. She recalls, “We were frustrated not knowing what was happening in the grades prior to coming to high school,” but had to take “the kids from where they were.”

Suzanne describes how their work progressed: “Rhonda and I just started talking together. We consulted with the counselor. I just raised my hand one day and said, ‘we need to do something.’” The principal agreed. Suzanne and Rhonda made a commitment at that point to try to figure out how to get the identified group of students to achieve. Their goal was that the students would pass the state exams and be able to graduate: “Rhonda and I came up with a plan,” and Suzanne explains that the principal “gave us permission to start moving kids.”

Suzanne explains that there was no curriculum available, at the time the teachers began the Fundamentals project, that had been designed to teach students who were significantly behind in achievement in high school: “The text book would simply say clarify here, predict here.” She says the text would expect the students have the skills and she says that “good readers do that naturally.” In other words, the curricular materials available did not support explicit
teaching of the skills the student needed. The teachers had to figure out how to break down the processes and intentionally teach the skills. “Now I would stop and teach it because I don’t assume anything anymore,” Suzanne says. Eventually the teachers were able to identify and purchase materials that better guided the student through this skill development.

During that first summer before the program began to enroll students, Suzanne tells me that the teachers talked together, brainstormed, researched materials and strategies, and developed and wrote curriculum and lesson plans: “We talked a lot. We spent a lot of time that summer developing curriculum for something we didn’t know was going to work.” When they got stuck, Suzanne says, they consulted with anyone they knew who might have the bit of information, the strategy, the understanding of the students that might help them figure out what to do. She said that they talked with other English teachers, and “we talked a lot with the counselor who sees kids who come through with challenges.” Suzanne explained how the four teacher leaders had walked into uncharted territory: “We knew they couldn’t do something, we just didn’t know what to do. Somewhere along the line they’re stuck and I don’t know how to un-stick them.” She continues to believe that, “They want to learn they just don’t know how to un-stick themselves … until somebody breaks it down for them.”

Suzanne observes that the climate at the high school is becoming more interactive: “We’ve become a closer staff … especially this last year.” She says there is “conversation about how to work with students who aren’t meeting the WASL. I think teachers are really trying hard to figure out how to meet their needs.” Suzanne pointed out that the administrators, especially the principal, are important to her work and to changing the school climate and culture. She speaks about the importance of the principal to support, encourage, and promote professional growth and change focused on student learning: “I think there's something else here that we
haven't identified as part of the success that we're seeing and that is the principal.” She also gives credit both “the principal and the assistant principal … their ability to allow us to try different things and take risks and to support.”

One of the discussions among teachers and administrators at Three Rivers High School has to do with the balance between emphasizing subject matter content and teacher presentation verses addressing the variation in student learning in a class. Suzanne says that teachers tend to “leave the end of the school year and think about how they are going to do a better job at covering their curriculum.” She claims, “Our focus is still on the teacher actions rather than the student learning results of those actions.” She says, “If there is data there, how can we not look at it and start to reflect on what we did with those kids? Recognizing that even small shifts in the school culture are important she says, “There are more conversations going on about learning.”

While three of the four teacher leaders are together, a discussion develops about the character of students. The teachers reflect on the influence of popular and other external cultural influences that may impact students’ readiness to learn. Students are “less physically active,” Suzanne says, and they have “less experience with the natural world,” She goes on, “They are more visual, they respond to computer games; it’s that computer game generation.” The teachers are talking about how the kids are getting more and more passive when Suzanne says, “...they’re wanting us to do all the work.” She explains that students “are more focused on what it takes to get a grade or credit than what it takes to achieve real learning, real understanding and to develop skills for their future.” The teachers seem to agree that students are less inclined to work cooperatively with other students to learn. Suzanne pointes out that “research strongly suggests having kids interact.” However, she observes, “...they don’t want to do that. They just want you to tell them how to get the right answer.”
Suzanne’s says that she believes that the students’ lack of achievement is not due to a lack of desire, or willingness to learn. She says this has been reinforced as she worked with this group of students. She says she has discovered that the job is more than presenting information and directing kids to apply skills. She finds that her teaching needed to be made up of a variety of learning activities, not simply a variety of presentation strategies: “If a teacher is constantly lecturing, they are only going to get to the kids that get that, but if a teacher is doing a mixture of things then the percentage increases.” She explains that if somebody isn’t learning she needs to find out what is missing and what she can do to help them get “unstuck.” Suzanne claims that what we have to do as teachers is “teach students to learn... to move toward a conversation of how to help kids learn to learn.”

Suzanne tells me about students who have low expectations for their futures and that she tries to help them: “They don’t see that learning is going to be a helpful cause for them.” She says she believes that competition for grades is unproductive to get some students to learn. She says that she tries to get them to “not look at other kids, but look at themselves in terms of where have you been, where are you now, and where do you want to be?” However, the teachers discussed the system and the culture in many high schools like this one is focused on competition, on sorting and separating, rather than encouraging an individual’s learning progress. Suzanne explained that each student “comes into the classroom with different life experiences, so we have to work with our own perception of where we are and where we want to be as opposed to comparing ourselves with the 4.0 student.” She explains that she shares the responsibility with students for their learning: “If I have three kids in class that aren’t getting it, to me I need to learn more about how to get to those kids. We can’t just say it’s them.”
Hazel Shoultz

*Introducing Hazel*

I’m definitely not a shrinking violet. I say what I think... I think the conversation is, and the process is, part of our product. It makes us stronger as a district.

Hazel is an athlete with a significant presence both physically and in persona. As a coach, she carries some of the stereotypical characteristics, in particular, a powerful voice and expressive hand gestures. She views her role as a coach as an extension of her role as an educator: “...it has a direct impact on these young women I work with… the overall character of who they become.” She says that it helps “kids can make connections to school and to extend learning beyond the classroom.” Hazel is not complacent about her teaching, although a veteran teacher of nearly 25 years. She tells me that she coached sports as a young person and knew that she wanted to be able to continue. In addition, she explains that school was an environment she knew and understood.

I find Hazel confident, capable, and self-assured. Through our conversations, I have learned the she has a strong interest in seeking fairness and understanding. Before conducting the interviews with Hazel for this study, I would have described her as having a “black and white” perspective. However, during our interviews, she revealed that she was far more reflective than I had realized before. I learned to see Hazel as a person who sincerely and intently seeks to know herself and the world. She seems to possess a strong desire to question, to explore, and to learn new things. She tells me how she takes the things she reads and learns from them by using them as a lens with which to understand and explain the world she experiences. Hazel sometimes gets frustrated and discouraged, but overall and outwardly, she is a jovial person, smiling and laughing and using humor to engage with others. She is both courteous and respectful
Hazel began her teaching career in a small rural school district; she took a brief diversion from teaching to be a vice principal and now has spent most of her career in her current position at Three Rivers. Hazel says that she found the work of administration to be unsatisfying: “I hated being an administrator! I would think of excuses not to go to work if I could. I would lie in bed being horrified that I had to go to work.” About teaching she says, “I never feel like that now. It almost feels like I was born to do this.” When I ask what led her to become a teacher she replies, “That wasn’t my plan, honestly, when I went to college.” She explains that she expected to go into computer science, but in the process discovered, “I enjoyed my math classes a whole lot more than I was enjoying my computer science courses.”

The one thing that encouraged Hazel’s interest in teaching was the personal connection she made with one of her college professors: “Somewhere along the way, I decided to pursue teaching. It just kind of happened.” She goes on explaining, “I took a methods course and ran into my, what I basically call my mentor, a professor… he was just inspiring.” The relationship, the respect she held for him, and the sense that he believed in her, she tells me, was powerful in shaping her self-confidence: “He believed in you; I mean, honestly!” Hazel says that there were other teachers “who also inspired me ... There were teachers who were willing to talk to you, answer your questions, who encouraged you to think.” Hazel suggests that relationships, the personal connections teachers made with her, were part of what inspired her to become a teacher.

Hazel refers to her students as “great kids.” She tells me, “I would say there are very few students that I dislike. I find the variety that I get in my classes very interesting.” She expresses an appreciation that students are different, that they bring different pasts and worldviews to the classroom, and that those differences bring value to the classroom experience for her and for all of the students. She genuinely likes and values young people and expresses her understanding
that they are developing and discovering themselves: “There are some kids that just drive you nuts. They’re not bad kids; they just drive you nuts. And, they are the kids that maybe need a little more attention sometimes; so they need to be in your classroom.”

Hazel describes herself: “As a teacher, I’m prepared… well organized… structured and linear.” Hazel explains that, “When I walk into the classroom … I’m ready, I have a plan. I spend a lot of time thinking about where the kids are, kind of [their] readiness… to get from point A to point J, [and] what are all the little stops along the way.” She says that “I strive to be helpful, to people, to help them do their jobs, or help them be a better student… athlete… yeah, just try to be helpful.” She continues describing herself as a teacher explaining that she takes the responsibility of her work very seriously: “You can’t pay me enough to do the things I do if I do it right, and you’re paying me way too much if I don’t do things right. There’s very little middle ground to me.”

Hazel considers her early teaching experiences: “I soon realized it was more about the kids than it was about the math. I was very serious about the math” She says that being serious about helping the kids “came around gradually.” Her first job came in a small school district where the students had already started school, and had been taught by two or three different substitute teachers already early in the school year. She explains, “I had to do a lot of thinking about, how do I approach this?” She says that she realized the students had not learned some of the concepts they needed in order to go on. She told herself at the time, “They don’t know that and they really need to know that...” She implies that her job is not simply to take the kids through the chapters presenting the material, but it is figuring out where the students are and how to get them to make progress. She says, “That’s your job.” She made a decision about that class saying, “…there’s no excuse! We are going to go back and we’re going to do it right.”
Hazel remembers the time she was in charge of recommending new curriculum materials when she was the only math teacher in her school district: “I was responsible for the entire curriculum. She recalls that she was telling the school board that “this book’s fine, but then I had to go defend it. I was so nervous. I started to feel more professional.” Later when she went to work in a somewhat larger school district, she says she learned the value of working with other teachers. It was not very long after coming to Three Rivers that parents and students, comparing her with other teachers, confronted her: “It was not a positive situation.” She explains that parents began to complain that her expectations were out of line when compared to other. Hazel tells me that finally one of her colleagues reached out to her. The two of them got together and compared their assessments and grading practices. They learned from each other, and ultimately Hazel found ways to improve communication with parents and provide feedback that helped students better understand their own learning progress. Hazel explains that this relationship was important to her: “Just being able to talk with her about that, and her acceptance… having her support and her mentorship… was huge.” Later as the department chairperson she says, “I got to meet all of these really good teachers ... I was infected, if you will, with that professionalism quite early because I was surrounded by it.” Hazel claims that “One of he biggest influences you have as a teacher is who surrounds you. I’ve come to realize that that’s precious.”

Hazel initiated some of the early discussions that led to the Fundamentals project. She and other teachers recognized that the courses offered at the high school were not able to help some of the students meet the State’s standards and be able to pass the state assessments, the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). During a conversation with Tammy, she had asked, “Is what we are doing going to help prepare them for the WASL?” Tammy observed, “It only prepares them for part of it.” They realized that there was a need to do something
different for those students who were not on course to meet the standards. Hazel tells me that the teachers did not know where it would lead, but realized they had to change if they were to get different results in student achievement: “We made the connection—the one little spark of knowing we’ve got to do something different.”

In an effort to persuade people to take a new direction, Hazel presented the teachers’ perspective to the School Board. During the presentation Hazel acknowledged that she did not know exactly how to teach students who did not learn with numbers the way that she could. However, she committed herself to learning and adjusting her teaching so that she could better understand what the students need and so she could better help them learn. She also told the school board that she recognized that some students have so many other issues to deal with that learning at school is way down their list of priorities. Hazel implies that every student presents her with a unique relationship and every student needs to learn in a different way: “they all have a different readiness level coming in, which is huge.” Hazel further points out that each student’s learning needs are different so they sometimes need different instruction: “…this conveyer belt system that we have is not appropriate. You’ve heard me say this several times.” She went on to say, “…unless we drastically rethink the processes and the learning of students, we’re going to get the same results ‘cause we’re doing the same stuff.”

Hazel points out some of the barriers to learning that she and her students face. Hazel explains that for some students, “… the psychology is almost paralyzing for them.” They say things like, “Oh, we’re stupid, or we can’t do this, oh I don’t care, or misbehave.” She goes on claiming that “holding schools and teachers, solely accountable for students’ achievement is not appropriate if the parental or the student situation is such that this is not important to them; it
doesn’t matter a whole hell of a lot what we do.” She qualifies this saying, “Now, I will always try my best ... cause I do care about them and I will tell them that...”

Hazel says she believes that students, especially those in the Fundamentals project, learn best if they make a personal connection to school and the adults in them: “A lot of middle school literature, years ago, was about making sure that every kid had an advocate where there was a connection between every kid and an adult. I think that’s still true, especially for this group of kids.” She explains that she devotes a lot of time and energy connecting with the students: “I think they’re very disaffected in a lot of ways. We do a lot of relationship building... I’m trying to learn about them, I’m trying to help them learn about me, trying to show interest.”

Hazel points out that not all teachers agree that there is a need to connect with students. She described the term “old school” referring to out of date or out of touch practices: “Big time ‘old school’, you know what I am saying? She describes how the focus for teacher has changed: “I think we are in some ways more engaged in the teaching of it versus the mathematics of it. Does that make sense?” Hazel is referring to teachers who are so involved in the subject matter that they may forget that the young are not as inspired by the content as they are. She says that teachers who could be described “old school” are sometimes the most knowledgeable and skilled in their content. For some of the best students, she says, “I think it may work for them, but not for the majority of kids.” For most students, she says, a teacher has to find ways to make the content relevant. Hazel she pays attention to details in her planning in order to try to reach the learning needs of all students and even so, she says, “My classes see no difference. My students see no difference.” She says the special attention she puts into her planning may not benefit everyone in her classes, but she says, “It may for one or two students.”
In sum, the portraits of the four teacher leaders presented in this chapter suggest that they share characteristics and dispositions in common, though they are also unique individuals. These portraits also demonstrate that each teacher has a passion for their work that has been highly influenced by their life experiences. These and other themes will be developed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 5

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative, heuristic inquiry was two-fold. The first of these two purposes, which is the focus of the thematic analysis presented in this chapter, is that the study set out to explore the lived experiences of four teacher leaders working in one comprehensive high school in a district where I am the superintendent. The second purpose of the study learn from the experiences of the teacher leaders to inform my actions, as superintendent, so I could help the school district develop structures and resources to support the work of these and other current and emerging teacher leaders, will be discussed in Chapter 6.

Concerning the first purpose, the study addressed these questions: (a) What are the teacher leaders’ personal and professional histories, qualities, and dispositions? (b) What is the nature and purpose of the work of these teacher leaders? (c) What are the contextual elements of the school district that either support or create challenges for the work of these teacher leaders? and (d) What is the impact of the work of these teacher leaders? The fifth research question relates to lessons learned from and actions taken because of the study and will be addressed in Chapter 6.

Data were collected through in-depth individual interviews with the four teacher leaders and a follow-up focus group interview. In addition, I observed these teachers as they worked in classrooms, and we continued to have informal conversations throughout the period of the study. As this was an heuristic study, I also kept journal notes in regard to my learning as a superintendent, actions taken as a result of this learning, and observations of various meetings and workshops related to these actions. I wrote reflective memos and constructed graphic
organizers based on observations and thoughts about the work of the teacher leaders and readings of related literature. Finally, I collected documents related to the actions taken as a result of the study. Analysis of the data, as described in Chapter 3, Methods, resulted in the identification of nineteen themes arranged into four major categories. The four major categories are: Teacher leader dispositions, purposes of teacher leadership, means of teacher leadership, and the context of teacher leadership. The categories and related themes are listed in Table 1, Themes from Analysis, below.

Table 1.

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<th>Major Categories</th>
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<td>Value Interpersonal Relationships</td>
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<td>Take Responsibility</td>
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<td>Means of Teacher Leadership</td>
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<td>Building Relationships</td>
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The first major category, teacher leader dispositions, includes the participant’s explanations and personal insights about various formative influences that shaped their dispositions. The teacher leader dispositions that were identified in the data suggest that the
teacher leaders are orientated toward service, value interpersonal relationships, are motivated to learn, take responsibility, focus on students, and hold strong educational beliefs.

The next two major categories, purposes of teacher leadership and means of teacher leadership, are related to the teacher leaders’ dispositions in that those dispositions may form a basis for their sense of purpose and the means they use to accomplish their work. Finally, the category, context of teacher leadership, emerged as a factor shaping the parameters and possibilities of the teacher leaders’ work.

Themes related to purposes of teacher leadership include improving individual student learning, improving instruction, and influencing the culture. Themes related to means of teacher leadership are being prepared and responsible, building relationships, researching and learning, using results and data, collaborating, and distributing leadership.

The context of teacher leadership, the final major category, includes the themes principal leadership, school culture and climate, students and the community, and educational reform. The four major categories and related themes are discussed in the sections that follow and include references to relevant literature sources.

Teacher Leader Dispositions

The collaborative effort that brought the four participants in this study together, and was a factor in selecting them to participate in this study, as described in chapter three, was focused on a learning problem in their school. The learning problem became apparent as a sub-set of students’ consistently over time failed to demonstrate mastery of the basic learning standards established by the state. Though the teacher leaders were engaged in this collaborative effort together, it is apparent that they are diverse in their experiences, ages, and styles of professional practice. They each possess unique personal qualities and dispositions that seem to guide the
purpose and means of their leadership practice. However, the four teachers also share dispositions in common suggesting they are oriented toward service, value interpersonal relationships, motivated to learn, take responsibility, focus on students, and hold strong educational beliefs. While they acquired these characteristics from differing personal and professional journeys, it appears each was drawn to the collaborative project aimed at helping students in part because of these common dispositions. Other teachers in the same context not sharing these dispositions may not have been inspired to focus their leadership toward the same purposes or employ the same means these teachers did to accomplish their work.

The four participants in this study made reference to and connections between their current personal and professional dispositions and various life-shaping experiences, beginning with childhood and progressing through their early professional life. These formative experiences are reflected in George and Sims (2007) research in which they studied 125 “top leaders” from a variety of sectors, both men and women, examining their personal histories related to their complex human beings, people who have distinctive qualities that cannot be sufficiently professional practice:

Leaders are highly described by lists of traits or characteristics. Leaders are defined by their unique life stories and the way they frame their stories to discover their passions and the purpose of their leadership. (p. xxii)

George and Simms found that the leaders they studied developed personal stories based on formative experiences. Those stories became the foundation of their dispositions and leadership passions. George and Simms also concluded that successful leaders acted on these personal passions through their leadership. They suggest that a leader progresses through stages of leadership, and that leaders’ success seems to be related to their ability to use their personal passions as a kind of rudder that guides their actions.
The literature regarding teacher leadership is quite explicit about the kind of personal characteristics and dispositions that promote effective teacher leadership. For example, York-Barr and Duke (2004), as a result of reviewing 140 studies related to teacher leadership spanning two decades, concluded that the dispositions related to teacher leader effectiveness include an orientation toward learning and possession of leadership capacities. In addition, effective teacher leaders establish trusting relationships and interact through formal and informal points of influence. The characteristics and behaviors that help teacher leaders build and sustain positive relationships, trust, and respect are cited throughout the literature as important factors contributing to their leadership effectiveness (Lieberman & Miller, 2004; York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Murphy, 2005).

Reflecting these research findings, the portraits of the four teacher leaders participating in this study, presented in Chapter 4, illustrate that each reflected upon how and why she became a teacher. Included in their stories were poignant childhood experiences, family relationships and influences, and early school and professional experiences that they claim have influenced the person and professional they are today. Some of these influential experiences are included in the sections that follow.

_Oriented toward Service_

The teacher leaders in this study showed a disposition oriented toward service. This theme emerged as the teachers reflected upon why they chose to teach and why they do the work they do. Having empathy for others in difficult circumstances and helping in a sustained and relational manner are attributes that surfaced with each of the participants, supporting the notion of a disposition toward serving.
For example each of the teacher leaders used the terms “care,” “help,” or “helping” as well as the term “service” to describe this disposition. Hazel said, “I think that service, that helpfulness is a large component of who I strive to be. I strive to be helpful to people to help them do their jobs or help them be a better student.” Suzanne said, “I knew I wanted to work with, I felt comfortable working with, people who needed help.” Tammy said, “It’s just part of my nature you know, caring about people, and wanting to help.” Speaking about the things that cause her to develop and strengthen her relationships with her colleagues Rhonda put it this way: “But I think it’s listening and helping to work through a problem, which is what I do with my students, too.” Hazel spoke of herself as an educator when she said, “You’re in service to them... It’s what I do. It’s basically being in service to the people you work with, [you work] for, or ... that you’re teaching. You’re in service to them. I’m a big believer in service.”

Related to the disposition oriented toward serving, evidence of empathy emerged through the teachers’ use of the term “care.” For example, Suzanne said, “...we care for each other now independent of our subject areas...” Hazel commented, “I need to tell the kids by that action that I care.” Tammy does not use the term “care” or “empathy,” but these concepts were implied when she said, “There are kids ...that have some real issues in their lives. It amazes me how some of these kids can even make it to school when they’ve got so much baggage that they are dealing with.”

The teachers related their orientation toward service to experiences and people in their lives and their families’ values. Each mentioned various early experiences that connected with their disposition to serve. For example, Hazel spoke about her parents’ disposition toward service and said, “...we’ve talked about this with my mother and all her community service—— even my dad to a certain extent.” Hazel reflects on her parent’s disposition toward service in
relation to her own: “So that’s probably an internal characteristic that gets expressed in that way.” Suzanne talked about empathy and care for others in her family: “I had a good family and probably my spiritual connectedness to the overall picture of human beings.” Tammy explained how her parents were examples of service to her and her siblings: “...my parents struggled—we weren’t rich by any means, but education, it was never a question...” Suzanne spoke of how she and a friend in high school would consider future jobs they would want to have. She said, “I realized that everything I chose at the time ... was mostly to help people.”

The teacher leaders’ words speak of seeing beyond a face in the classroom and that they care about what they see. They acknowledge that a student’s situation may be impacting his or her learning. The teacher leaders empathize with students whose lives are often complex and for whom the path to learning is difficult. They give evidence that they view their work with colleagues in the same manner. With empathy, care, and helpfulness the teachers strive to do their work through a disposition of serving.

*Value Interpersonal Relationships*

The teacher leaders value interpersonal relationships. This emerged as a disposition among them and is intuitively linked to their disposition toward service and caring. These teachers are highly social and need to interact and relate to others. Tammy points out that she is an educator “because of that human contact, you know, working with people and not just at a desk.” Suzanne said that “it goes to a personal level so that ...we care for each other ... checking in with each other...”

The teacher leaders’ relational disposition is related to a belief that learning involves social interaction. Hazel said that “...school isn’t about the bricks and the books, it’s about the people,” and she argues that the capacity for positive relationships is more important than
content expertise when choosing a teacher. She claims that given the choice “between some person that had tons of math experience” and someone with less experience who was good at making interpersonal connections needed to be “good for kids,” she would choose “the ‘newbie’ every time.” Hazel suggests that caring for and helping one another is a basic personal disposition she said, “... that’s part of me ... showing interest ... trying to help”

The teacher leaders talked about the people and experiences that seem to have reinforced their own disposition to value relationships. Hazel tells of the individual attention given to her by her teachers, saying, “The teachers I had K-12; there were teachers who were willing to talk to you, answer your questions, who encouraged you to think. My fourth grade teacher, Mr. Cabasos, a great guy.” Embracing high expectations while showing care for and confidence in students, former instructors of the teacher leaders have become models for them as they developed their own relational disposition. Hazel spoke about one of her professors who took a personal interest and invested in his students beyond the course content and beyond what he was required to do. She asked, “How many college professors take his methods class to go to a conference?” She recounted that, “…he called me up halfway through my student teaching and he said, ‘there’s a school here on the west side—their math teacher left—and they need a math teacher. I think you should come over and interview’” And then she exclaimed, “He believed in you. I mean, honestly!”

Tammy talked about the positive results and satisfaction that can come from positive relationships with students. Forming relationships with students helps her develop an awareness of individual students and a basis to better serve the learning needs of students. Tammy recalled a specific student whom she was particularly concerned about: “She is only a freshman, but her confidence was clearly dwindling fast.” In collaboration with the counselor and principal,
Tammy tried a new learning intervention. She beamed about the results when she said, “I saw that spark in her. She felt good about what she was doing.” The relationship Tammy formed with this student seemed to have given Tammy the insight she needed to discover a learning intervention that worked.

Rhonda points out that valued relationships do not simply happen, they must be cultivated. She said, “I think part of it too, is being a good listener.” She explains that trust is an important factor: “They know that with me, they know that what they say stays here.” She goes on to explain that the relationships she values with both colleagues and students are formed as a result of her own dispositions and actions: “I think it’s listening and helping to work through a problem.”

*Motivated to Learn*

Lieberman and Miller (2004) describe teacher leaders as learners and researchers. Being motivated to learn guides teacher leaders to seek knowledge and understanding about teaching and learning, the context in which they work, and the nature and needs of particular students they serve. The disposition to be motivated to learn can also contribute to a teacher leader reflecting upon his or her practice for the purpose of changing when and if necessary to gain better results. Katzenmeyer and Moller (1996 cited in Swanson, 2000) found that schools that support teacher leadership are settings in which teachers are encouraged to collaborate, to participate in school-site decision-making, to engage in on-going learning, and to reflect upon their pedagogy. Lambert et al. (1997 cited in Swanson, 2000) add that practices that best encourage leadership provide teachers with time and opportunity to engage in reflecting on the practices of the classroom with their colleagues. More recent literature on the topics of professional learning communities and teacher leadership cite reflective behavior as being an essential for the
effectiveness of teacher leadership and collaboration through “professional learning communities” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, 2004; DuFour, Eaker, & Eaker, 2005).

Reflecting these points in the literature, the teacher leaders in this study talked about learning and reflecting on their practice. Hazel said, “I read a lot of books. I try to connect that to what I do so there is thoughtfulness involved. ... When something happens I’d like to think that I have a way to approach it.” Further, the teacher leaders’ learning involves thoughtful social interaction. Hazel said, “I don’t think everybody is thoughtful, but a lot of people around here are... you can have some amazing conversations about a variety of things and it’s really cool.”

Consistent with the descriptive literature about teacher leadership, the teacher leaders in this study focus their professional learning toward improving their practice and improving student learning and achievement (Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Reeves; 2008; Murphy 2005; York-Barr and Duke, 2004). Tammy explained an example of how the teachers sought opportunities to learn new strategies by observing other teachers and seeking training: “Hazel was able to go visit his classroom to see how it worked and she was pretty impressed with what she saw.” Tammy went on to say, “We ended up moving forward with using his curriculum and going to the training.” Reflecting on a lesson, Hazel admitted, “So when I did it the first time, I don’t know if I was ill-prepared; I don’t know where my mind was. I just thought it was horrible.” Her reflective thinking was only the first step. After reflecting and seeking additional learning, she acted to do the lesson over for better results. She exclaimed, “I was just, oh my God! I did it the next day and I put some arrows on my notes and I did some different things and the second time...” she was rewarded with the success she hoped for, better learning results. “I go, dang, that was great. Good job!”
Reflective thinking guides the teacher leaders’ learning. Suzanne reflected on her career comprehensively, but also considers success each day. She said, “I’ve reflected ...you would think that after 30 years you’d be in a different spot. She went on to explain that she reflects on student learning each day: “If I am frustrated with how everybody is interacting, that’s the issue that night. If it’s a student ... then it’s the student.” The teachers also suggest that reflective thinking is part of their learning process and guides them toward finding solutions to learning problems, turning them away from accepting excuses or placing blame. “Yep, and maybe I’m the one that needs to change,” Tammy admitted. She when on to explain a sense of having inadequate strategies to work with students so far behind, saying, “I think this is where I need more training, I’ve never had to do it... that’s not where my experience is.” Similarly, Suzanne acknowledged that when some of the students are not learning we “need to learn more about how to get to those kids.” Being motivated to learn precludes being satisfied, comfortable, and safe. Rhonda said, “... It is a willingness to maybe change ... which is harder than being in a nice groove that you kind of just keep moving through.”

Take Responsibility

The four teacher leaders take responsibility, approaching their practice in a professional rather than technical manner. Educational writers criticize the “deprofessionalization” of teaching (Elmore, 2000, 2002; Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Murphy, 2005) in which teaching is treated as technical work and described as a set of skills, behaviors, and techniques to be mastered and evaluated. Until recently, teachers have generally not been expected to accept responsibility for student learning outcomes, placing that responsibility heavily on administrators, families, curriculum planners, instructional materials, and the students themselves (Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Murphy, 2005).
The teacher leaders in this study exemplify taking responsibility for learning challenges and outcomes. Rhonda explained how the teacher leaders began to realize that it was their responsibility to figure out what students needed to succeed: “We knew because of the WASL that we needed to get kids up skill-wise not just expose them to materials.” Taking responsibility, Rhonda expressed an orientation toward her students as clients and a commitment to work with each of her students so that they achieve: “Am I reaching all of them?” Suzanne said, “…kids in class that aren’t getting it, to me I need to learn more about how to get to those kid.” Hazel added “with the Fundamentals we’ve tried to approach kids in a different way. “I think this is where I need more training, I’ve never had to do it... that’s not where my experience is.” In other words, the teachers acknowledge in these statements that it is their professional responsibility to exhaust their own resources, to learn from others, and to be willing to change instruction or implement other interventions in an effort to help students learn and make progress in achievement.

In addition to taking responsibility for students’ learning the teacher leaders also alluded to taking responsibility for system changes, that is, responsibilities in regard to the practices of the school and system. Rhonda said, “I’m a firm believer, too, if you’re going to complain about the system, you better be willing to change it or you better be willing to contribute or you better have ideas.” In addition to having and sharing ideas, the teacher leaders also commit to taking action. Rhonda insisted, “You can’t just sit around and bitch and moan about what’s going on and then not try to do something. Kind of put up or shut up.”

Summarizing, the teacher leaders show a disposition to take responsibility by taking responsibility for their students’ learning and for improving the school. Their disposition to take responsibility orients their work toward students as clients rather than objects for teaching. When the teacher leaders take responsibility, their focus turns away from teaching and toward student
learning. Teaching, then, is explained by the teacher leaders as the means to serve the students’ learning rather than a purpose in itself. Hazel expresses this when she said, “This conveyor belt system that we have is not appropriate.” Emphasizing responsibility for student learning she says, “...unless we drastically rethink the processes and the learning of students, we’re going to get the same results.” In addition, the teacher leaders’ disposition for taking responsibility extends toward influencing and improving the school system.

*Focus on Students*

Being focused on students involves assessing school culture, classroom practice, instruction, and learning through the lens of a student’s perspective. The teacher leaders’ dispositions that are oriented toward service, value interpersonal relationships, and take responsibility are related to their focus on students. The teacher leaders also report various influences that have shaped their disposition to focus on students.

The four teacher leaders in this study frequently referred to the term “student,” a particular student, or related terms such as “boy”, “girl,” or “kid,” when discussing every aspect of their work. Tammy spoke about the results from one class in which nearly all of the students failed to meet the learning goals she had established for them. However, one student did, and that was important to her. Tammy said, “I remember there was one girl in particular who ... was taking the Fundamentals class ... She said, ‘this class was exactly what the WASL was about, and it’s because of this class that I passed the WASL.’” Suzanne focuses on what will make the learning relevant for the student. “Not just say, because you need to know it ... [but], what makes this relevant to your life?” She also tries to de-emphasize comparisons between students: “I try to have them not look at other kids and look at themselves.”
In a focus group conversation, the teachers discussed trying to get every student to learn and achieve the state standards. Suzanne explained that sometimes “I don't know what to do.” Tammy agreed, “Oh! But I’ve said that,” admitting that she sometimes thinks certain students do not have the capacity to learn what is expected. Rhonda pointed out, “Yeah, but you don't actually give up on them.” During another interview, Hazel recalled a situation when “students didn’t know what they were doing and that drove me nuts.” She recognized that in order for students to be successful “you’ve got to be able to simplify this.” Hazel knew that some of the students were missing a critical skill and she acknowledged, “There’s no excuse.” She recognized it was the students and the learning that were important more than forging ahead with covering the content. She decided, “We are going to go back and we’re going to do it right.” Rhonda emphasized that it is what students take away from having been in her class that is important: “I try to remember that I want my students to be able to go out and do, not just maybe know or vaguely remember something.”

The teachers described making connections with individual students and that these connections gave them insight into how unique past and current experiences influence students’ learning. The teachers began to understand that individual students have unique learning needs that are constantly changing with the student’s situation. Thrust into a high poverty school within an ethnic minority community, Tammy recalled:

I started seeing more of what’s going on at home and how they couldn’t come to school because they had to either work or they had to take care of little brother or little sister because mom had to go to work or all these other reasons that were getting in the way of school. And, it wasn’t because they were lazy or just didn’t want to come to school. It was pretty important reasons, family, survival...

These experiences crystallized this teacher leader’s student-centered disposition and a professional purpose to solve student learning problems: “I would have had no clue... They made
me want to help those students whether they were going to college or going to work but just help them be successful.”

Early teaching experiences described by the teacher leaders helped to shape their disposition to see through the eyes of and focus on students. By listening and learning from their students early on, their awareness and understanding of the concept of a student expanded beyond their own personal experiences. Tammy recalled a situation in her first year of teaching: “I remember vividly asking a senior that I had in class, I said, ‘where are you going to college next year?’” As a student herself there had never been any question about going to college. Her family, her friends, the environment she grew up in caused her to simply assume her advancement to college. But, the student told her, “he wasn’t going to college; he was going to go work.” Tammy said, “I remember that moment so vividly because it was such an eye-opening thing for me.” The idea that students come to school with a wide array of self-perceptions, aspirations, and goals was at the time a new concept to Tammy: “That was such a culture shock for me.” Part of a teacher leader’s formative experiences may be found in a new environment, one in which the norms are different than previously experienced. Simply gaining a new perspective in this different environment and culture may have shaped Tammy’s leadership potential: “I think I learned a lot from those experiences...”

In their own words, the teacher leaders have a disposition to focus on students. By listening to their students, they seem to learn early on as teachers that the student’s perspective is more important for learning than the teacher’s perspective or the content of instruction. Further, the teacher leaders believe, as will be discussed further in a later section, that the student’s situation and context influences his or her learning. For their students to learn, these teacher leaders have discovered that they must connect to the student’s reality, experience, situation, and
context. With a focus on the students, Tammy said, “It amazes me what they do. I think we have some pretty amazing kids.”

*Hold Strong Educational Beliefs*

The teacher leaders in this study hold strong educational beliefs. For example, one of these beliefs that surfaced in the analysis was that pedagogy is more important than content knowledge for effective teaching. Suzanne said, “I think a good teacher is somebody who can go into any subject matter.” She went on to claim that a good teacher, even not knowing the content well, “can excite some learning in the students, and bring a passion or excitement that the information is relevant.” She explained that “you can be an expert writer and not be able to get across to the students why it is important for them to be able to write clearly.” The teacher leaders do not discount the value of content knowledge. What they seem to know, however, about their roles as teachers and teacher leaders is that it is not content knowledge alone that results in excellence in instruction. They express a belief that having knowledge about the process of learning and well developed skills to facilitate that learning, and then appropriately applying both, will result in better instruction than simply possessing more content knowledge or expertise in an academic field.

Another example of the teacher leaders’ disposition to hold strong educational beliefs surfaced as they spoke about the value of collaborative professional learning. Tammy explained how interacting with colleagues has value: “Even though they have taken the entire prep period I’ve felt like it was worth it.” She claims that engagement with others enhances productive learning: “To me that’s more productive than just sitting in a staff meeting and not ever getting a chance to really talk.” Hazel stated, “Having such a collaborative team of ... teachers has been
really good. I’ve learned a lot from the people I teach with. Just hearing their perspectives on things, but even going more into specific sharing of ideas.”

Yet another example of a strongly held educational belief among the teacher leaders is that students need different learning interventions and amounts of instructional time in order to achieve. Tammy claims, “The best way to get a student who’s behind ...to grade level is ...double-dosing” instead of pulling the student from the general educational program and expecting less at a slower pace. Rhonda explains that teachers need to be aware of what students know and can do and then take them from that point and help them make progress. The teacher leaders claim that students who are behind may need more time and extra instruction to achieve adequately. Of course, the student and family must be willing to accept the “trade-offs” that may be necessary for the extra instruction indicated. Tammy described some of the resistance she has experienced, saying there are “all sorts of excuses why not ... for some parents, they don't feel that it's that important.” She said some parents “don't want to force their kids to put extra time in.” However, the teacher leaders describe a strong belief in assessing the student’s learning realities and advocating for appropriate and needed instruction: “Growth should be the testament to how they are doing,” Rhonda said. Tammy added, “If all they improve is one grade level each year, they’re still not going to be up to meeting that standard.”

These teacher leaders sometimes harbor educational beliefs that go against traditional wisdom and practice. They struggle with educational traditions they view as relics at best and as impediments, or even deterrents, to student learning at worst. For example, Suzanne said, “Grades are a huge struggle for me. Several of us have debated this... just to try to figure it out.” Recognizing the potential for misusing grading she asked, “Do [students] deserve an ‘A’ if they're at the top of their class, or if they get all of their papers done, or is their ‘A’ going to be
different [in different classes]?” Like these teacher leaders, Reeves (2004) questions the motives of grading practices when he suggests that rewards and punishments are part of the psyche of schools, particularly at the secondary level, and argues against that perspective as one that thwarts learning.

Related to beliefs about grading, the teacher leaders expressed strong beliefs about labeling and sorting students in schools. The conversations with the teacher leaders sometimes pivoted around “struggling learners,” students who do not perform as desired or expected. But too often, according to these teachers, this label is applied and educators walk away as though these students are someone else’s problem, resorting to excuses and blame, or worse accepting a belief that the student is incapable. Rhonda claims that teachers sometimes assume even high achieving students have the skills they need to learn. However, she said, “I believe that good strategies are just really good strategies for everyone” and that it is good to reinforce learning strategies with all students, not just those who appear to be struggling. She seemed to imply that even students who meet or exceed course expectations still may need to be reminded of learning strategies. She said, “Those strategies were in that book for college kids. I think that sometimes we forget that those kinds of strategies aren’t intuitive.” The teacher leaders in this study express dissatisfaction with simply sorting and labeling. Similarly, the teachers are critical of single modes of instruction that assume all students can learn one way. Suzanne explained, “If a teacher is constantly lecturing, they are only going to get to the kids that get that, but if a teacher is doing a mixture of things then the percentage increases.”

The teacher leaders strongly held beliefs include a willingness to confront accepted practice that is rooted in tradition and possibly in well intended but ineffective models. They are
willing to question and be questioned. While the teacher leaders hold strong beliefs about education, they are also willing to make changes based on evidence.

Purposes of Teacher Leadership

The four teacher leaders in this study described the purposes for their professional work as improving student learning, improving instruction, and influencing the school culture. The specific purpose of their leadership work in the collaborative project that was the major focus of this study was to help students who were two to four years from graduation and identified to be at risk of not graduating on time. In addition, influencing the culture in their school emerged as a purpose for these teacher leaders.

These findings reflect recent literature on teacher leadership, which identifies the purpose of teacher leadership as improving instruction and student learning (Danielson, 2006; Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Murphy, 2005; Reeves, 2008; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). The related roles for teacher leaders described in the literature include such things as leading professional development, facilitating groups, coaching, researching, mentoring, and developing and writing curriculum and assessments. Across these roles, the scope of teacher leaders’ influence described in the literature ranges from influencing one or more colleagues within a school to influencing district-wide initiatives and system-wide efforts. These conceptions of the purposes and roles of teacher leadership suggest instructional leadership beyond the teacher leader’s own classroom. However, effective classroom practice can be considered teacher leadership if it is made visible and public, influences the practice of other teachers and educators, and influences the culture of an educational setting (Danielson, 2006; Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Murphy, 2005; Reeves, 2008; Smylie, et al, 2002; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). The following sections discuss the three
themes that emerged in this study related to the purposes of teacher leadership: improving student learning, improving instruction, and influencing the school culture.

Improving Individual Student Learning

The teacher leaders in this study describe their passion for improving the lives and learning of their students. Their focus is on individual students and individual student learning, rather than improving the schools’ composite student achievement scores, which is often the focus of school systems and policy makers. Suzanne insists that if she has students in her class that “aren’t getting it, to me I need to learn more about how to get to those kids.”

The teacher leaders put each student’s learning at the core of their sense of purpose even when it creates tension with other teachers. Rhonda said, “...there’s resistance. People don’t understand.” She went on to explain: “Well, I’m not here for them, I’m here for the students. I have to do what I think is right, at the end of the day, for students...” Suzanne said, “I'm going to be pretty brutal here for a minute.” She reported she senses resistance from other teachers: “My perception is, ‘as long as I don't have to teach them, I don't care what goes on.’” However, she said the teachers in her department have come along: “They’re starting to realize that, oh, well I can't just give this kid a D or an F and know that I'm a good teacher because they're not doing what I want them to do.” Suzanne said she is compelled to try to influence her colleagues and her school culture, because, for the students “it is our responsibility to bring them from where they are further along.”

Reinforcing the notion that students must find their own unique path to achievement, the teacher leaders discussed the tendency, especially in high schools, toward comparing and competing versus looking at individual progress. Recognizing how discouraging competition can be to learning, Suzanne says that she tries, “to express to them that they can’t compare
themselves to other kids.” She tells her students that, “...each one of us comes into the classroom with different life experiences.” She wants the students to develop a personal perspective about their learning: “We have to work with our own perception of where we are and where we want to be as opposed to comparing ourselves with the 4.0 student.”

In a related exchange the teacher leaders expressed frustration with the recent reform movement stressing standardization. Rhonda said, “I think it should be based on where they were and how far they’ve come and the measurement of growth instead of the standard.” She explained that students “have worked so hard and grown so much but all they see is that they failed.” She asked “You take them growth wise ... so then why is the test standardized?” They explain that systems have evolved to measure student learning success based on a single point of standard proficiency within a prescribed learning timeline. Suzanne said, “my frustration comes when the state says, if you do this, this, and this, you’ll be a better teacher.” These teacher leaders advocate a different approach that would account for the progress a student makes over time based on his or her unique baseline, but would still allow a student’s growth to be measured against a set of standards. They argue that such an approach would encourage learning, while the current standardizing system discourages learning for some individual students. As reported earlier, Rhonda said, “Growth should be the testament to how they are doing.”

The teacher leaders’ focus on individual student learning is further illustrated by their willingness to explore non-traditional means of instruction that may connect with an individual student’s learning capacity and needs. Tammy said, “We’ve kind of jumped on that boat and found some success with the on-line classes ... being able to find a class that is more at the level of a particular student.” The teacher leaders express an understanding that there are limits to what the school’s traditional practices can provide and show a willingness to look beyond the
school for appropriate learning solutions to improve individual students’ learning and achievement.

Improving Instruction

The teacher leaders were selected for this study partly because of their involvement in a project aimed at helping students who were not making adequate academic progress. The teacher leaders’ intent to improve instruction was not realized through formal roles such as an instructional coach or professional development facilitator. Instead, what occurred initially is that the teachers collaborated for the purpose of enhancing their own instruction in order to meet the specific needs that they had begun to identify among the students they were trying to help. It was after some time, as they gained a better understanding of the students and their learning needs, that the four teachers came to the conclusion that the students needed a different approach to instruction from all of their teachers. As this awareness developed, the teacher leaders’ purpose to improve instruction broadened to incorporate a focus on improving instruction collaboratively with other teachers.

When the teacher leaders first began the project, they focused on learning about the students and why they had not been achieving. Tammy said she and Hazel struggled with “first of all, identifying those students and then, what are we going to do for those students?” The teachers found that some of the students were proficient only at an elementary level, and Tammy admitted that “this is where I need more training, ‘cause even though my endorsement says 4-12 math, I don’t feel like I’m qualified to teach elementary math.” As the teacher leaders learned more about the students and their learning needs, they realized they didn’t have the instructional solutions needed to address the learning problems the students faced. They sought opportunities for learning to improve their instructional skills specifically for the group of students they were
trying to help. Tammy said they had “come across ... this curriculum that we thought looked pretty interesting, and in our discussions, it seemed to fit into what we were talking about and so we were able to go to a training.” Rhonda remembers that they asked themselves, “right, how do you teach them to think; basically is what it comes down to...” Sometimes they were surprised by what happened, Rhonda recalled, “Now, my first year with the Fundamentals kids, I think we underestimated them and they really did really well. The reasoning was there and maybe it’s just that they needed a different pace and that’s what we provided them.”

The four teacher leaders came to realize at some point that they could not shoulder the full responsibility for the group of students they were trying to help. Their focus on improving instruction broadened from their own classrooms and the limited collaboration they had established among themselves to an acknowledgement that the students needed help from all of their teachers. Since the four teachers had discovered that they needed to learn different strategies to help this group of students, they found it reasonable to expect that other teachers might be experiencing similar limitations in reaching this these students. They realized that the students had not been successful at least in part because their teachers had not found the instructional strategies that would meet these students’ learning needs and overcome their unique learning barriers. Rhonda admitted that the students needed extra help “and additional support from teachers as well.” She said all of the teachers need to have “an awareness of how to reach the students even if it’s just 2 or 3 strategies.” She said that she and the other three teacher leaders “might have 15 to 20 we’re using, but if each year teachers in all content areas tried 2 to 3 this year and 4 or 5 the next it will start to build.” The teacher leaders set out to encourage such learning among other teachers. Rhonda said, “Uh huh, teaching other teachers.” She said that Suzanne had become involved in planning and facilitating professional development for
secondary teachers in regard to reading in the content areas. She said, “I think her elementary background really lends to that too, with the reading.” Suzanne was encouraged by one outcome of these efforts: “I did do that workshop this spring...” she said, and explained that she had included a survey after the workshop that invited teachers to participate in peer coaching. She said, “I did have one teacher ask that I come in ... which I thought was great.”

*Influencing the School Culture*

York-Barr and Duke (2004) describe the “targets” of teacher leadership to include influencing other teachers, the school, and the school system. Early in this study, when the teacher leaders described themselves during interviews, they generally did not use the term “leadership.” However, toward the end of this study, they began to use the term leadership to describe their work with others. For example, when asked to describe her role in a particular project Rhonda exclaimed, “[I’m] a leader because I’m one of the few willing to do that work.” She explained that she was willing to take the initiative, “to give it a try and see where it’s going.” She said she took it upon herself “to organize others, and talk it up cause there’s resistance.” In these expressions, Rhonda recognized that teacher leadership with an aim to influence the school culture involves taking initiative and responsibility, and comes with the risks that decisions may not work and that peers will not be supportive.

Her additional comments reflect Danielson (2006) and others’ conclusion that when a teacher’s successful and competent professional practice is public, other teachers who seek similar results are likely to be drawn to that teacher’s influence: “There are several teachers who come to me,” Rhonda explained, “...when they have questions ... how to deal with this situation or ... with a student, or how to deal with a particular parent; what do I do about it, kind of questions.” The teacher leaders, sometimes to their surprise, found themselves being role models...
and resources for ideas and leaning for other teachers. “Maybe they got good advice the first time” Rhonda went on, “so they came back for more.” Rhonda describes this aspect of teacher leadership as an extension of the professional and respectful way she treats her students as clients: “I think it’s listening and helping to work through a problem, what I do with my students, too.” The teacher leaders, Rhonda explained, are aware of the importance of maintaining integrity and trust with their colleagues in order to have the kind of relationships that allow them access for influence. “I think part of it too, is being a good listener and they know that with me, they know that what they say stays here. I don’t go around and talk about it.”

The teacher leaders express a desire to influence the school culture by helping others improve their practice. Rhonda points out that “a lot of them call me ‘cause I’ve helped them before. I strive to be helpful to people to help them do their jobs.” They expressed a desire to influence systematic change that could bring greater focus on individual student learning. What we have to do as teachers, Suzanne said, is “teach students [how] to learn... to move toward a conversation of how to help kids learn to learn.” However, the teacher leaders are realistic and know there are limits in the capacity for people to change. Tammy explained that “…there are teachers that don’t necessarily block things, but are very uncomfortable with change…” Understanding that cultural change is slow, the teacher leaders acknowledge they must be patient with their colleagues and with each other. However, through discussions with other teachers—in department meetings, in staff meetings, and even informally around lunch—they have begun to notice a change in the culture. Suzanne has recently been working to expand her knowledge, understanding of, and skills with instructional strategies that research has demonstrated to be effective in improving student learning. She has facilitated professional development workshops, sharing her knowledge and encouraging and inspiring others to join with her in expanding
instructional knowledge and capacity. In doing so, she is helping to initiate small professional learning communities and networks that can provide support and opportunities for teachers to learn from one another and to solve student learning problems as they arise. Suzanne stated, “There are more conversations about how to work with students ... teachers are really trying hard to figure out how to meet their needs.”

The four teacher leaders in this study are influencing changes in the culture in their school toward improving student learning outcomes. To this end, and aligning with a theme to be discussed later regarding collaboration as a means of teacher leadership, Tammy, along with other teachers and administrators across the school district, has participated in training to learn strategies and protocols for the purpose of leading others in collaborative work. She has attended training and now participates on a district committee to establish teacher collaboration focused on knowing, understanding, and teaching the state’s standards. Suzanne leads professional development workshops in the district to provide teachers information and the opportunity to learn and apply research based instructional strategies. Tammy is emerging as a leader in the collaboration to align curriculum and select instructional materials for the district. Rhonda has collaborated with Suzanne to administer a state level learning improvement grant in their school. Suzanne has conducted a series of book studies in which she encourages teachers to engage the school culture toward artfully applied instruction that can meet the learning needs of more individual students. Suzanne is encouraged. She claims, “There are more conversations going on about learning.” The teacher leaders exemplify, by extending beyond the collaborative project that provided the focus for this study, that they also seek to influence their school’s culture toward solving learning problems.
The major themes in this study regarding teacher leader dispositions, purposes of teacher leadership, and means of teacher leadership are interrelated and interdependent. This section further highlights this interrelationship by showing that dispositions of the teacher leaders may also form the basis for their means of leadership. For example, a teacher leader who possesses a disposition toward establishing and maintaining positive relationships may naturally use that characteristic to his or her advantage when influencing others to change. The literature is also quite consistent in connecting personal characteristics and dispositions to effective teacher leadership. York-Barr and Duke (2004), as a result of reviewing 140 literature sources spanning two decades, concluded that the conditions for teacher leader effectiveness include being respected as a teacher by colleagues, an orientation toward learning, and possession of leadership capacities. In part through their dispositions and characteristics, effective teacher leaders establish trusting relationships, and they interact through formal and informal points of influence (Lieberman & Miller, 2004; York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Murphy, 2005).

The following sections explore the means by which the teacher leaders in this study accomplished their work, as they sought to solve the learning problems they identified among the group of students they were trying to help. These means of teacher leadership include being prepared and responsible, building relationships, researching and learning, using data and results, collaborating, and distributing leadership.

**Being Responsible**

When confronted with the problem of students unprepared to graduate from high school the teachers took initiative and assumed responsibility rather than waiting for someone else to act. As Tammy put it, they were “...having conversations about being proactive instead of
waiting for students to fail the WASL.” The teacher leaders were motivated from within themselves to take the initiative, to make a change, and to make a difference. “We saw a need and put ourselves in that position ... we have this idea, what do you think? No one forced us to do it,” Tammy said and continued, “it really came from us, and that we saw a need for it.” The teachers recognized a learning problem, and they looked to themselves as a source for solutions.

For these teacher leaders, taking responsibility required avoiding the temptation to blame the student or the situation and to not accept excuses for poor results. Hazel described a situation that exemplifies taking initiative and responsibility first with students in her class: “I started teaching,” Hazel said, “and it was like, they don’t know that and they really need to know that. Then that’s your job ... there’s no excuse.” She decided, “We are going to go back and we’re going to do it right.” Similarly, Suzanne stated, “If I have three kids in class that aren’t getting it, to me, I need to learn more about how to get to those kids. We can’t just say it’s them.” Whether they’re high end or low end, or those in the middle, how can I get them?” She said, “If things aren’t working, there’s gotta be a better way.” In addition, Hazel recognized that the teacher leaders’ responsibility to students’ learning is not limited by the teaching contract or compensation: “You can’t pay me enough to do the things I do if I do [them] right,” Hazel said, “and you’re paying me way too much if I don’t do things right—there’s very little middle ground to me.” The teacher leaders take the initiative and responsibility to do difficult work. Rhonda said she has the “willingness to try something new ... to give it a try and see where it’s going ... to organize others.”

Taking initiative to confront problems directly, reaching out to people and seeking resources was another way these teacher leaders took responsibility. They did not assume that they could succeed alone. They had the courage to be vulnerable and to take on a problem before
they new how it could be solved. Suzanne described the situation that existed when she and Rhonda embarked on the project: “We consulted with the counselor. I just raised my hand one day and said, ‘we need to do something.’” Suzanne when on to explain that they “came up with a plan ...” She said they took risks and did a lot of work planning even though they did not know if it would be successful. “We spent a lot of time that summer developing curriculum for something we didn’t know was going to work.” She and Rhonda acknowledged to themselves and to their colleagues that they didn’t know exactly what to do. “We talked a lot with the counselor who sees kids who come through with challenges. We just didn’t know what to do. Somewhere along the line they’re stuck and I don’t know how to un-stick them.” Rhonda and Suzanne took the responsibility for the students’ learning: “They want to learn they just don’t know how to un-stick themselves.” They simply would not accept that the students could not learn. “They don’t know how to get better at something until somebody breaks it down for them.”

Being prepared is one way to show responsibility. “When I walk into the classroom,” Hazel said, “I’m ready, I have a plan. I spend a lot of time thinking about where the kids are, kind of [their] readiness… to get from point A to point J.” She described being prepared and responsible as being efficient, not haphazard. “First of all I’m very prepared. I’m very well organized and, in fact, I’m so structured and linear that my kids laugh at me.” Being responsible by being prepared involves doing what is right and needed even if there is no external accountability imposed. “My classes see no difference,” Hazel said. “My students see no difference. Some of the things that I worry about I know for not all students makes a difference. It may for one or two students...”
The teacher leaders’ take responsibility when they establish high standards of performance. Rhonda said, “...it is willingness to ... be the best teacher that you can.” Rhonda went on to describe the high standard she expects from herself: “…not just measuring yourself as a teacher with how the top kids are doing but how the bottom kids are doing. I think that’s really, really where the judgment should be, too.” She reflects on her practice asking, “Am I reaching all of them?” Rhonda elaborated on the high standards she sets: “I try to remember that I want my students to be able to go out and do, not just maybe know or vaguely remember something.” Rhonda pointed out that taking responsibility requires a measure of confidence in order to take risks and be vulnerable, to expose personal limitations, and to learn for the purpose of changing ones practice, if necessary, in order to get better results. “And I think it’s because I can,” she said. “It’s that I can do the job and I can do it well. I think it has a lot to do with my confidence.

Taking responsibility as described in this section is a means of teacher leadership. The teacher leaders point out the courage that is involved in taking charge of a problem and assume the responsibility for finding and initiating solutions to gain desired results. Being prepared and maintaining high standards of performance in their work are means to gain the respect and credibility among those they seek to lead and influence.

Building Relationships

York-Barr and Duke (2004), in their model for teacher leadership, claim that it is primarily through relationships that teacher leaders accomplish their work. Similarly, Collins (2001, 2005), in writing about the difference between the private and public sectors, describes the power authority in the social sector such as schools as “legislative.” In other words, leadership must be based on establishing relationships, listening, negotiating, and incorporating
various perspectives and needs through a process of compromise in order to reach sustainable change.

The teacher leaders in this study stress the importance of building and maintaining strong and positive relationships as a means to accomplish their work, and this means is clearly linked to their dispositions. Tammy explains, “It’s just part of my nature you know, caring about people, and wanting to help.” Suzanne said that it goes to a personal level so that “...we care for each other now independent of our subject areas, checking in with each other a little bit more. How ya doing? How’s it going?” They understand that learning involves social interaction. Hazel explains, “I’ve always said that school isn’t about the bricks and the books, it’s about the people.”

Referring back to their strong educational beliefs, the teachers rank the capacity for positive relationships to be more important than content expertise. For example, Hazel states, “...if I had a choice between some person that had tons of math experience and some newbie who I thought was just going to be good for kids, I’m going to chose the newbie every time.”

According to Tammy and the other teacher leaders, they are social people and need to interact and relate to others: “...one of the reasons I got into education was because of that human contact, you know, working with people and not just at a desk.” Relationships with both students and colleagues were described as essential in their work to improve instruction and student learning outcomes. Hazel explained that “when I’m there and showing interest and trying to be helpful and being thoughtful about what’s going on” she is able to accomplish things with others. The teacher leaders’ belief that interpersonal connections are important for learning reinforces that building relationships as one means of their leadership.
Furthermore, these teacher leaders work to cultivate the conditions, for positive relationships and not merely expect them to exist or arise spontaneously from others. Establishing trust and maintaining integrity are necessary conditions for these relationships.

“You know the gossipy nature that goes on,” Tammy said. “I’m sure it happens everywhere, but I really try not to get into that.” Hazel added, “then we can bring it to the table... at least have some conversation and I know that it would be listened to, we’d process it...” Hazel goes on to explain that the teacher leaders are willing to risk that an outcome may be a compromise or solutions may not immediately emerge, saying, “...and there might not be full resolution right away, but ...an avenue and channel to do that is extremely valuable.” She said, “I try very hard not to stand in other people’s way when they want to get something done but to help them.”

Researching and Learning

Lieberman and Miller (2004) describe teacher leaders as learners and researchers, and this claim is reflected in the disposition among the teacher leaders in this study toward learning, as described earlier. This characteristic also emerges as a basis for a means of these teachers’ leadership. Consistent with the descriptive literature about teacher leadership, the teacher leaders in this study focus their professional learning on improving their practice and student learning and achievement (Danielson, 2006; Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Murphy, 2005; Reeves 2008). Without research and learning, without new information creating a new lens through which to view current practices, the teacher leaders can get caught in a loop of seeing the same things in the same way. Hazel said, “I read a lot of books. I try to connect that to what I do so there is thoughtfulness involved... When something happens I’d like to think that I have a way to approach it.” Hazel explains that learning and research involve social interaction. “I don’t think everybody is thoughtful, but a lot of people around here are... you can have some amazing
conversations about a variety of things and it’s really cool.” Suzanne added, “I spend some time on the Internet looking at professional areas. And, besides the Internet, then I’ll go and look for a book.” Suzanne further explains how she seeks out opportunities to gain current and relevant knowledge and information to check it against past experience and what she already does and believes: “...this spring when I was able to go to LETRS conference, I just think I died and went back to teacher heaven. It re-affirmed what I knew to be true 30 years ago.”

Each of the teacher leaders report reading current educational as well as non-educational literature that might lead to insights in their quest to find more effective practices. Self-assessing their own personal competence, these teacher leaders seek to learn and close gaps in their own expertise. As Tammy stated, one issue she was facing was, “I need more training... That’s not where my experience is. I don’t feel like I’m particularly trained to do it so that would be an area if I am going to continue doing this I need to do some more background work.” She said she began her search for strategies by asking, “Okay, what will work, what are some strategies that elementary school teachers use for these different concepts?” Suzanne said they were first looking for strategies to help the students and “when we were on the internet, we did the ones that sounded like they were going to reach our students the best for our level and just researched them.”

*Using Results and Data*

Schmoker (2004) makes a case for using results in a disciplined manner to inform instructional decisions in schools. Similarly, Marzano (2007) recommends that teachers make “artful decisions” based on evidence in regard to proven practices and on developing disciplined attention to results or data. Marzano argues that the “art of teaching” involves choosing to implement proven practices through careful assessment of the local context. Continuing to use a
specific method or approach in a certain situation or for a particular purpose should depend upon the evidence that it is successful in the specific situation. Reflecting these perspectives, the teacher leaders in this study acknowledge the power of results and data to inform their instructional decisions and leadership. Hazel said, “I read this book called *Super Crunchers*. It was talking about when you make decision about things you need data.” She explained that experts may have broad conceptual understandings, but sometimes lack the specific contextual knowledge needed for developing a solution within a unique situation. She said, “A data driven decision is better than expert decisions. There are a lot of experts who will tell you that a program is good, but few can actually show you that they make a difference in student achievement.” Thus, Hazel is looking for instructional materials that will provide desired results. She is looking for evidence that something works within her context, instead of the chance it may work based on some generalized “expert” recommendation.

The teacher leaders in this study also recognized that when they change their practice it should be aimed at specific results. Rhonda said, “But everything that we did needed to have a purpose really with the [state learning standards].” However she explained that some changes are imposed externally making it difficult to anticipate the results: “When you change too many things you don’t know what you were actually looking to measure in the first place.” Rhonda acknowledged that sometimes decisions are made without a specific learning intent, or “just because it was a cool activity or we’d done it before and it seemed to have worked” and expressed dissatisfaction with repeatedly doing things that do not change the student outcomes. Focusing on results, Hazel claims that “It took me 10 hours” to write an exam. “I wrote several versions because I’m trying to get what the kids know.” She said, “I need to tell the kids by that action that I care about what they specifically know.”
An example of the teacher leaders’ focus on results occurred when they observed that when students were pulled from a general class to get special help the students did not achieve the results expected. The teacher leaders looked at the data and compared the results from different ways students had been assigned to classes. Hazel explained, “...we compiled data as to what class were they in, were they doubling up ... in another class?” Hazel described that she and Tammy looked for both qualitative and quantitative evidence to support decisions about improving student learning and added that, after looking at the information they gathered, “we got started talking and that’s what led to our idea of, we’ve got to do something different.” Suzanne suggested that evidence of student learning informs her instructional decisions: “If I have three kids in ... class that aren’t getting it” she will not “just say it’s them,” instead she said she will “look at my teaching.” Emphasizing the concept that results are used to inform change, Hazel claims that “unless we drastically rethink the processes and the learning of students, we’re going to get the same results.”

Using data and the results of changes they made in their practice allowed the teacher leaders see the learning problem students were having in a different and new way. It helped them change their thinking about how to reach the students. “We made a connection,” she said, “the one little spark of knowing, we’ve got to do something different.” Using results and data to change practice and improve instruction is part of the teacher leaders’ repertoire. Hazel claims that data “continue to inform us about, at least I think they do, about, will we make good decisions, [or] will we make bad decisions? And that’s one way, at least, of analyzing those decisions.”
Collaborating

One of the most common themes that emerged from this study involves collaboration as a means of teacher leadership influence. Danielson (2006) and other researchers tell us that a focus on evidence requires that educators de-privatize their practice and work together to improve outcomes. She states, “An important contribution of teacher leaders, then, is reassuring their colleagues that an examination of results with the aim of improving learning does not suggest a criticism of the work of teachers. Rather it represents joint efforts for better results” (p. 86). Similarly, in a study that included 81 schools in Clark County, Nevada, Reeves (2008) suggested that the greatest influence on a teacher’s professional development may be other teachers. This is true especially among teachers who share the same or similar work. There is rich literature regarding the value of collaboration among teachers and between teachers and administrators. The literature about professional learning communities by authors such as DuFour and Eaker (1998, 2007), Fullan (2006), Marzano et al. (2005), Murphy (2005), Reeves (2008), and Smylie, et al. (2002) describe positive influences on instruction and student achievement that result from a school culture of collaboration.

Hazel discussed how important it has been to her development as a teacher to share and discuss instructional practices with other teachers. “Basically I was formed in this really cool atmosphere where ...I was surrounded by colleagues who were interested. I’ve come to realize that that’s precious; it’s huge; ...you develop good habits that way at least.” Hazel further explains that a collaborative culture in the school influences the professionalism of teachers: “...I could model myself after some really good people. I was infected if you will, with that professionalism quite early because I was surrounded by it... It has changed me as a teacher because of who I’m surrounded by.” Hazel agreed that collaboration can be a means of teacher
leadership influence: “One of the biggest influences you have as a teacher is who surrounds you. …Being trained the right way, you’re not complaining about stuff, you’re just doing stuff.”

The teacher leaders in this study emphasize the value of collaboration as a means of accomplishing their work; however they also point out that there are barriers to establishing a fully developed culture of collaboration in their school. For example, collaboration may be seen as one more thing added to a teacher’s duties. Suzanne said the teachers are trying to collaborate to improve student learning: “I think teachers are really trying hard to figure out how to meet their needs,” Rhonda said, “but, there’s also no time to develop it ... there’s never enough time in teaching.” Suzanne explained that collaboration occurs when it is convenient: “…because of our schedules, or having rooms right next door to each other. That’s why I think the proximity makes it easy to collaborate.” Tammy said, “You know, this building is very departmentalized in its structure.” She added, “As the Fundamentals classes are going, I don’t really collaborate much with the other teachers. It’s mostly Hazel.” Rhonda said it “feels like we’re pretty departmentalized, probably because of the physical layout of the school.” She observed, “I don’t think there’s a whole lot of cross-content area work.” The lack of a systemic time structure, the nature of personnel contracts, and the reality of personal priorities sometimes inhibit collaboration. Tammy explains, “It comes down to going past the contract day.”

The teacher leaders’ comments also suggest that administrative leadership is needed for collaboration to be consistently effective and efficient. Unless a structure and protocols are established and maintained, purposeful collaboration may fade over time. “I wonder,” Tammy said, recalling the thirty minute period of time the schedule permitted for student contact and collaboration, “with our old schedule; it didn’t really happen. I think most teachers felt like it wasn’t happening ... I think it might be structured and it kind of goes away...” She continues, “In
Regardless of the barriers to collaborating, the teacher leaders in this study reflect the emphasis in the literature on collaboration as a means to accomplish their work. Hazel told a story of how she may have been the target of teacher leadership through collaboration: “One of the people who were very influential was here for years and she taught ... right next door. She taught me a lot about teaching.” Faced with a significant instructional problem, collaboration with the other teacher and the principal produced a solution: “…the first year I was here, there had been a complaint ...there was a petition going around this district ... saying hey, we gotta get her outta there.” In a non-threatening manner the two teachers, with support from the principal, were able to find solutions. Recalling the situation, Hazel said, “She worked with me I think during the spring of that year... just being able to talk with her about that and her acceptance... So having her support and her mentorship again was huge.” Tammy said, “For Hazel and [me], it’s been a lot of just talking ideas with the Fundamentals. ...originally what we came up with ...and how it’s changed so much.”

The teacher leaders suggest that collaboration is important, albeit not a systematic means to their leadership. Tammy said, “We eat lunch together so ... just the informal conversations that happen during lunch.” Rhonda reported that the four teacher leaders could not have found success without collaborating. She said they begin to collaborate “immediately, cause there was nothing to help us. I mean really, there still isn’t.” She said they met in the summer when school was out to plan for the next year: “Suzanne and I worked many, many an hour out of the back of her ... shop because it was air conditioned there, trying to develop something for Fundamentals.” Rhonda said that she collaborates with other teachers who come to her with “how to deal with
this situation ... or how to deal with a particular parent, or how to deal with a student or this is what happened today—what do I do about it—-kind of questions.” Hazel spoke of her department and being able to ask a “question about what do I think may be important.” She said, “I talk to a lot of people and that’s a good thing.” Suzanne added, “...conversation amongst colleagues is critical to growth.”

Distributing Leadership

The literature and research on the subject of distributed leadership describes a naturalistic network of formal and informal leadership that exists, evolves, and can be exploited by formal leaders for the benefit of the organization (Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2003; Spillane, 2005, 2006; Spillane, et al., 2001; Spillane & Orlina, 2005). However, according to Spillane (2006), distributed leadership is not a program or formula for leadership. It is rather a description of the natural leadership that occurs within the social networks of an organization. The teacher leadership project upon which this study focuses exemplifies the concept of distributed leadership. At the outset of the project, there was generalized collective awareness across the school’s faculty of the learning problem. The whole staff knew that, if students were unable to pass the state assessment, those students would not graduate from high school. Recognition of the learning problem existed among and was communicated by formal leaders including the school board, the superintendent, and the principal. However, it was through the teacher leaders participating in this study that leadership regarding the learning problem became distributed in the school. The teachers took their generalized knowledge of the learning problem, studied it more deeply, and proposed solutions. Their initial leadership in regard to the problem eventually spread to and involved counselors, other teachers, and administrators. Thus, a network of
distributed leadership emerged across individuals who had the information, knowledge, skills, and interest in the project’s success.

Rhonda and Suzanne recall that they “just started talking together. We consulted with the counselor. I just raised my hand one day and said, ‘we need to do something.’” Suzanne said that they “came up with a plan, and got permission to start moving kids.” Further, the teacher leaders report that their school principal collaborated with them and gave them the support and freedom to try new ways to reach students who display learning problems. Suzanne stated, “there’s something else here that we haven’t identified as part of the success that we’re seeing. [We owe success to] the principal and the vice principal that we have here right now.” She said these administrators have the “ability to allow us to try different things and take risks and to support us.”

Further, among the four teacher leaders, their leadership work aimed at implementing solutions to the problem became distributed as well. This occurred because they could acknowledge each others’ strengths. Rhonda recalls that she took on some of the organizational work “...because I’m ... willing to do that work, the base work of it, the getting the programs together.” They recall that Suzanne assumed different kinds of tasks by “going out and putting on curriculum... yeah, in-service, staff development... teaching other teachers…and I think her elementary background really lends to that too...” Divisions of labor were sometimes intentional as Rhonda described, saying “...that’s the role we put her in as well because during the school year she’s going to be a reading coach so that will be working with teachers to work with students...”

Although the teachers came together with similar dispositions to solve a specific learning problem in their school, each is unique. Different characteristics among the four teacher leaders
emerged as they worked together. The differences shaped the distribution of leadership to capture the strengths each had to contribute. At the risk of oversimplifying, and for the purpose of illustration, two of the teachers tend to focus on people and ideas while the other two tend to focus more on data and things. Two of the teachers show more interest and confidence in things like collecting and analyzing data, planning, documenting, and reporting, searching out and collecting useful materials. “I’m very much a paper work and law, the basics of it,” Rhonda said. “I’m the one checking on the funds and making sure our paperwork is done and looking at the numbers and trying to come up with a system where it’s not just lip service.” Hazel spoke about the different tasks she and Tammy took on, explaining that Tammy took on the social interactive work of engaging others in a dialog while she analyzed the data to support the conversations: “Between her conversation and some of the numbers I was looking at, that’s when we got started talking.” Suzanne and Tammy developed personal connections and established relationships seeking input to find approaches to problems of instruction and learning. “We talked a lot with the counselor,” Suzanne said, “who sees kids who come through with challenges”

It is important to emphasize that common to all of the teachers in this study a disposition to build relationships as well as other leadership qualities such as organizational and management skills. In fact, each of the teacher leaders show a variety of well developed competencies. However, as the leadership work preceded, the teacher leaders suggest that it became distributed among them in ways that tended to reveal subtle areas of skills, competence, and preference. Other times leadership was distributed as a matter of convenience or opportunity. Thus, distributing leadership among them was intentional and sometimes unintentional. In addition, the teacher leaders acknowledge they did not possess among them all that was needed to solve the learning problems they faced. Therefore, as a means of teacher leadership, they reach
out to a network of professional colleagues, drawing in leadership from those who had knowledge, and skills, and positional power that could assist in their work. Distributing leadership as a means of teacher leadership, then, took place among the four teacher leaders as well as throughout a network of colleagues in their school.

Teacher Leadership and Context

The literature describing effective teacher leadership concludes that the context of teacher leaders’ work is important in shaping the nature of teacher leadership. York-Barr and Duke (2004) provide a comprehensive view of the critical elements of a context that supports teacher leadership. They conclude that, in order for teacher leaders’ work to be most successful, the context must ensure that it is valued; is supported with resources and by school culture and administrators; made visible; and supported by development opportunities for the teacher leaders. In this study, the teacher leaders discussed salient aspects of the context in which they work.

Principal Leadership

Focusing on school leadership relations between principal and teachers, Marks and Printy (2003) state that, “when transformational and shared instructional leadership coexist in an integrated form of leadership, the influence on school performance, measured by the quality of its pedagogy and the achievement of its students, is substantial” (p. 370). Danielson (2006) adds, “...there are important and complex relationships between teacher leadership and administrative leadership; neither can exist without the other” (p. 28).

During a focus group interview, a conversation among Suzanne, Rhonda, and Tammy exemplified these findings in the literature. Suzanne began by saying, “I think there’s something else here that we haven’t identified as part of the success that we’re seeing and that is the
principal and the vice principal.” She went on to discuss the importance of “...the principal and the vice principal that we have here right now and their ability to allow us to try different things and take risks and to support us and to be on top of things.” The teacher leaders discussed their valuing of administrators as instructional leaders and sources of knowledge for them: “...they’re on top of the latest information....,” said Suzanne. The administrators mitigate barriers to student learning by knowing and keeping, “...on top of the students,” Rhonda added. A principal supporting teacher leadership targets resources and creates opportunities the teachers need. Rhonda reported that they are supported with “any professional development we need.” The administrators find ways to create collaborative time for teachers to work together: “If you don’t have that, time wise,” Rhonda alleged, “it would be unmanageable to do all that research on your own.” The school administrators, in this situation, are influencing the context of the school, providing support and opportunities for collaboration, thereby leveraging teacher leadership and guiding it toward improving the school.

The teacher leaders suggested that a principal who supports them will recognize improvement over time and does not make judgments about their work based on minimal information: “And one of them would walk in and sit down and we'd talk, and talk with the kids. Their comments later would be, ‘you’re just doing a great job with them.’ I’m going, I am?” As an element of the context of teacher leadership, when the principal supports the teachers they are more likely to be motivated to assume leadership and take responsibility for improving the school and its outcomes: “You know ...wanting to do a better job,” Suzanne said. “I want to do a better job for the principal because he's allowing me to shake things up a little bit.” Tammy explained that the teacher leaders also value the broader view provided by school administrators: “I feel like they both see that big picture.” She continued by saying, “Whereas within our own
departments we get stuck” thinking about what is good for our department. The teacher leaders describe their administrators as important in influencing the context that supports their practice.

School Culture and Climate

Danielson (2006) emphasizes the importance of school culture in regard to teacher leadership. “This culture determines, to a large degree, the extent to which teachers will be able to acquire and exercise skills of leadership.” She continues, “The culture of the school has an important influence on how the school operates and the extent to which it can achieve positive results for its students” (p. 45). However, Reeves (2008) points out:

Children can give up the illusions of Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy far more easily than some of my colleagues will give up the illusions that punitive grading policies lead to improved student performance, that final exams and one-shot multiple-choice tests are effective and related to the world awaiting students after school, or that staff development based on lectures in dark auditoriums will ever transform professional practices. (p. 57)

DuFour and Eaker (1998) add:

The concept of changing culture may seem simple enough, but changing culture is not like changing the décor. Altering beliefs, expectation, and habits that have gone largely unexamined for many years is a complex, messy, and challenging task. Furthermore, any existing culture is a powerful representative of the status quo and will typically resist attempts to change it. Yet those who hope to develop their school’s capacity to function as a professional learning community must face the challenge of shaping the culture. (p. 133)

In this study, the teacher leaders recognize the importance of the overall school culture in regard to their work and their goals. They discuss the dilemma of schools’ traditional focus on inputs and teacher and system actions, rather than outputs, student learning and achievement to inform school improvement. And, they recognize how difficult it is to change that cultural norm. They believe that if the culture begins to look at results, at evidence of learning, they will have a better chance of improving learning for students. “If the data’s there,” Suzanne asked, “how can we not look at it and start to reflect on what we did with those kids and what we can do to ... help
the kids that we have now, improve at a faster rate.” She then declared, “I don’t know why anybody wouldn’t want to look at the data.”

The teacher leaders also recognize that the school structures and procedures in the school are part of the culture impacting their work. The school has been involved in revising its daily schedule from a three period per day alternating A-B schedule to a more complex modified block schedule in which two days per week the students attend all six of their classes and the other three days they attend four periods per day. The teacher leaders anticipated challenges from this transition that may impact learning. Rhonda explained that there had “been too many odd changes. You know, we’re going to a different schedule so we’ll have to see how that works out.” Tammy summarized, saying that it will “be interesting. I think it’s going to be better having shorter periods of time, seeing them more often during the week.” But, she said, “It’s going to be an adjustment.” In addition, the physical structure of the school has an impact on the potential for collaboration and can lead to isolation of teachers and limit the influence of teacher leadership. Tammy states, “You know, this building is much departmentalized in its structure,” with pods and departments isolated from one another.

Another contextual challenge for teacher leadership from within the school culture occurs when educators resist change. Tammy tries to explain: “I love our staff, but my biggest complaint is there are people who’ve, I don’t want to say that, they’ve driven people away” when they are pressed to change. According to Tammy there are those who bring up the past or cite anecdotes seemingly to impede change: “... it’s okay to question and ask questions about decisions that have been made ... ultimately, let it go!” Suzanne explains that the school culture does not always support the idea of changing practice and taking responsibility for student learning. There are some who react to students who fail to keep up with the class “who are real
quick to say that they just can't be in my class, they just need to go somewhere else ... if you
don’t get it, tough.” Tammy expressed her discomfort with the perception that students who are
different, sometimes poor, and do not act like most of the students are largely looked down upon
by some in the school. “It’s those kinds of things that make me think of [us] as being elitist.” She
said, “…at times it can come across that way.” These comments show that the culture and climate
of this school can be a contextual challenge for teacher leadership. When students fail to achieve,
the school culture may draw conclusions that are not founded in evidence and avoid learning
about and understanding the student and his or her learning needs.

It bears acknowledging, however, that these kinds of resistance are not the only barriers
the teacher leaders face. Teachers, teacher leaders, and the school system cannot solve every
learning problem. Rhonda observes that there are things “that are getting in the way of learning.”
She said, “We, as teachers and as a school district, can’t fix all of those things.” Rhonda
acknowledges that there are “clearly some issues going on whether it’s motivation on [the
student’s] part, or family issues, or whatever.” As Hazel reveals that teacher leaders also express
frustration with the lack of impact they find they have with some students: “Yeah, and holding
schools and teachers, solely accountable for students’ achievement is not appropriate. If the
parental or the student situation is such that this is not important to them, it doesn’t matter a
whole hell of a lot what we do.”

But, the school culture does not always resist teacher leadership. The teacher leaders
generally express hope and optimism for an improved school culture that will emphasize
students and learning. “I feel like our staff here at least talks more,” Tammy said. “At staff
meetings we have talked more as a group, especially this last year, we’ve been given more
opportunities to talk...” For the most part, the teacher leaders view teachers as sincere and willing
to improve their instruction and to help more students achieve at improved levels. “Especially this last year there are more conversation about how to work with students who aren’t [succeeding],” Suzanne observed and went on to say, “I think teachers are really trying hard to figure out how to meet their needs. There are more conversations going on about learning.” The teacher leaders observe that the school culture is shifting toward supporting collaboration. Tammy said, “I feel like our staff here at least talks more ... at staff meetings we have talked more as a group, especially this last year, we’ve been given more opportunities to talk...” She reports that the principal has established routines that encourage collaborative engagement involving more of the teachers: “I liked having our prep-period meetings so we could talk and discuss with people outside of our department and get their perspectives...” And she added, “Even though they have taken the entire prep period I’ve felt like it was worth it.”

Although the school culture and climate sometimes present barriers to teacher leadership, the teacher leaders suggest that the desire among teachers in their school to work collaboratively for students is spreading. Suzanne indicates a growing desire to seek help from among colleagues: “I see that happening more.” She said there are “more conversations about how to work with students who aren’t meeting the [standards].” Rhonda said, “Our department works great together. We try to meet once a week ... so that we can discuss things that are going on and make sure that we’re on the same page with expectations.”

**Students and the Community**

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005), Murphy (2005), and Reeves (2008), along with others, argue that the context is an important consideration in determining the nature and potential of teacher leadership. For example, learning problems that surface because of a particular community situation may be unique to a specific context. Marzano (2007) further
explains that the context is why the “art of teaching” is so critical to successful instruction. A program or instructional strategy implemented without giving consideration to what the students already know, to what their experiences have been, to the context of that learner, will only inadvertently be effective regardless of how much empirical research supports the strategy generally.

The teacher leaders in this study know that the character of the community and its expectations are elements of the context of a school that can have an impact on the school and on teacher leadership. Tammy said she learned that the students’ and the community’s expectations are part of the context she has to consider: “Going from a school that was, you know, 80% of the kids going to college, to ... where you had kids doing all sorts of different things. I think that was such a culture shock for me.” The teacher leaders suggest that the community culture assumes expectations about learning that do not necessarily work for students who come from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. “Because it’s a small town, and a college town,” Tammy explained, “you’ve got a lot of students whose parents are affiliated with the university.” The teacher leaders recognize that the university context has a homogenous character that may exclude some perspectives. “I think just being in this community there’s that unspoken academic vibe” that may inhibit understanding of diverse perspectives and learner needs. Tammy acknowledged the collective indifference at times to those who are not like most of us: “...we have that tendency to be elitist.” The community culture, then, may resist the teacher leaders’ work to influence changes that may improve student learning among some students.

The teacher leaders understand that the problems and pressures facing students from outside the school need to inform their instruction and leadership within the school. Hazel said, “If I have a kid who comes to school and they tell me what’s going on in their life, I understand
that my class is not the most important thing in their life and I have to be willing to accept that.”
“We’re only so big,” Tammy declared. “How many electives can we really offer without it
taking away from something else?” She explains that “sometimes it feels like we’re trying to do
everything we can and yet the parents or student isn’t meeting us part way...” Tammy went on to
explain that “we just have parents that will push ... which isn’t bad. Parents just want what they
feel is best for their kids and they want to give their kids every opportunity...” The teacher
leaders know that they teach students who are influenced by the community and family context
they experience every day. However, Hazel conceded that “when I know, it’s a lot easier to
accept the limitations of what they are probably capable of that day or that week or that month.”

However, the teacher leaders observe the community changing around them: “There are
some students who are comfortable,” Rhonda said, “but because their family doesn’t put
importance on education, it’s not important to them either.” The teacher leaders are aware that
assumptions they may hold can become obsolete as the community context changes. “There is a
group of kids that they don’t belong anywhere; that group of kids is growing rapidly,” Rhonda
explained, and went on, “…it amazes me how some of these kids can even make it to school
when they’ve got so much other baggage that they’re dealing with. I think we are getting more
students with economic hardships than we’ve had before.”

Student’s perspectives also contribute to shaping the context for teacher leadership.
Considering the students’ perspectives, teacher leaders report that they need to understand and
explain the ways that their students learn, communicate, and are motivated to learn: “They are
more visual, they respond to computer games—you know, it’s that computer game generation,”
Suzanne declared. Hazel reasoned, “I also think that the culture has influenced kids about how
they interact with their world ... in terms of electronics.” The teacher leaders observe the
character of their students in order to make adjustments to instruction based on what they know about their students: “We talk about how the kids are getting more and more passive. They want us to do all the work,” Suzanne stated. The teacher leaders described students who they see as more externally than internally motivated. They say that students are less inclined to work with other students to learn and may lack the patience for the processes that have traditionally been credited for improving learning. “The research strongly suggests having kids interact, and they don’t want to do that,” Suzanne explained. “They just want you to tell them how to get the right answer.”

The teacher leaders make an effort to understand the community context within which the students live. With that knowledge and understanding they are better able to discover approaches that work for particular students. Suzanne emphasizes this saying, “We can’t just say it’s them.” Tammy recognizes the students as part of the context of teacher leadership and expresses the hope and optimism that persists among the teacher leaders in their work to improve student learning and achievement: “It amazes me what they do ... when we give these kids opportunities to do things and then what they are able to do. I think we have some pretty amazing kids.”

**Educational Reform**

Schmoker (2004) argues that the efforts at system-wide reform have been ineffective, and that large system reform is not the appropriate target for changes to improve instruction, learning, and achievement:

Even though we already know the best way to improve instruction, we persist in pursuing strategies that have repeatedly failed. There are simple, proven, affordable structures that exist right now and could have a dramatic, widespread impact on schools and achievement — in virtually any school. For years, they have been supplanted and obscured by hugely popular, but patently discredited, reform and improvement models. (p. 424)
The state of Washington has undergone what is approaching thirty years of school reform efforts, and the teacher leaders in this study express frustration with this situation. Tammy said, “...with the reform, that we’re being thrown different ... try this; and then things kind of change a little bit at the state level...” Suzanne declares her “frustration comes when the State says, ‘if you do this, this and this, you will be a better teacher.’”

The teacher leaders sometimes describe the large system efforts as misplaced in their focus on educational inputs such as curriculum, assessments, graduation requirements, and teacher knowledge rather than individual student progress. The teacher leaders suggest that, while the content of instruction is important, changes that will improve student learning will be found, not in more content expertise, but in improved knowledge and practice of pedagogy. Unless instruction and pedagogy change, as Hazel was reported saying earlier, “...unless we drastically rethink the processes and the learning of students, we’re going to get the same results...” Teacher leaders recognize that the subject matter a teacher knows is not sufficient without knowing how students learn. Unless you are a pedagogical expert, expertise in content knowledge of an academic field is largely wasted as a teacher, according to Suzanne: “You may become more knowledgeable about the subject area, but you are not becoming a better teacher.” The teacher leaders think that policy makers who shape reform efforts have not significantly addressed pedagogy, but focus on content knowledge for teachers. “Right, secondary teachers have two pedagogy classes,” Suzanne pointed out.

In the context of school reform, while policy makers concentrate on system-wide reforms such as system accountability, standards, and standardized summative assessments, the teacher leaders observe that little attention has been given to the fundamentals of teaching and learning. Without the support and attention of policy makers, teacher leadership within schools must
navigate a maze of new initiatives and regulations. Hazel said there are “too many mandates in order to flex to meet an individual’s need. That’s what it feels like.” Federal and state reform efforts have placed heavy emphasis on assessment, system accountability, and the content knowledge of teachers. This reality also shapes the context of teacher leadership. To some extent the teacher leaders see these elements of their context forming barriers to their work. Instead of standardization of education, these teacher leaders say that accountability should focus on student learning growth and achievement. Rhonda declared, “I think it should be based on where they were and how far they’ve come, and the measurement of growth instead of the standard.” They indicate that the system discourages the children who are the most difficult to reach, and thus it discourages the teachers who are willing to address their learning needs. Furthermore, the mixed messages interfere with the influence teacher leaders may have with colleagues to affect changes that may improve their schools and student learning. According to Rhonda, good pedagogy tells us to work with students’ prior experiences, prior knowledge, and current learning level, so if we are to “take them growth wise ... then why is the test standardized?”

After twelve years in its development, it appears that the reform experiments in Washington State will continue. Currently, the new state superintendent has vowed to do away with the existing state assessment, the “WASL.” Rhonda tried to explain her frustration saying, “If I knew the state had these ... core concept areas ... but I don’t even know if we have that. Do you know what I’m saying? It’s real hard being a teacher right now.” As the context of the teacher leaders’ work continues to change as a result of reform efforts by policy makers, Tammy, exasperated and frustrated, asks, “I don’t even know; is the math WASL going away at the elementary level too? I’ve heard other people say not just math, but the entire WASL is going to go away ... because of money, because of recession.” However, pushing back against the
challenging context of school reform, Tammy again expresses the optimism characteristic of these teacher leaders: “I guess because we’re in education we need to be flexible; whatever they throw at us. Do we just keep trying something else and hope that works? Sometimes it feels like we’re the only ones that worry about it.” She went on, “I just need to focus on the ones that are moving forward, the kids we can help.”

Summary

In summary, the themes developed from the analysis of data in this study are closely interrelated. The teacher leaders possess strong dispositions toward serving, relationships, learning, taking responsibility, focusing on students, and holding strong educational beliefs, which have been shaped or reinforced by formative interpersonal relationships and experiences. These dispositions, in turn, shape and influence the purposes for their work as well as the means by which they carry it out. In addition, the teacher leaders suggest that the context within which they lead has a significant impact on the conduct and effectiveness of their leadership, in other words, in their capacity to express their dispositions, pursue their purposes, and engage in the means of accomplishing their work.

The next chapter will offer conclusions based on the analysis of the data, provide a discussion of the heuristic nature of this research, describe action taken as a result of the study, and finally, propose recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSIONS, ACTIONS TAKEN, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative, heuristic inquiry was two-fold. First, the study explored the lived experiences of four teacher leaders working in one comprehensive high school in a district where I am the superintendent. Second, in keeping with heuristic research, the study sought to learn from the experiences of the teacher leaders to inform my actions, as superintendent, so that I could help the school district develop structures and resources to support of the work of these and other current and emerging teacher leaders.

Chapter 5 presented a thematic analysis related to the experiences of the teacher leaders. This chapter will present conclusions based on this analysis, reflections on the heuristic approach to the study, what I learned as superintendent, a description of actions taken based on those learnings, and recommendations for further research.

Conclusions

The themes and categories identified in this study both reflect and expand on the extant literature on teacher leadership. Specifically, York-Barr and Duke’s (2004) model of teacher leadership provides a useful perspective for comparing the results of this study to the literature. The York-Barr and Duke model is introduced Chapter 2, Literature Review, and is referred in subsequent chapters throughout this report. In brief review, the first component of the York-Barr and Duke Model describes “teacher leaders” as being respected as teachers, learning oriented, and possessing leadership capacities. The second component, “leadership work,” suggests that teacher leadership work must be valued, visible, negotiated, and shared among those who are targets of their leadership. A third component describes the needed “conditions” for teacher
leaders’ work, including a supportive culture, supportive principal, time, resources, and professional development opportunities. The next component of the model identifies the “means of teacher leadership influence” to include maintaining a focus on teaching and learning, establishing trusting relationships, and interacting through formal and informal points of influence. Another component of the York-Barr and Duke model is the “targets of teacher leadership influence” which includes individuals, teams or groups, and organizational capacity. The final two components, “intermediary outcomes of teacher leadership” and “student learning,” represent some of the outcomes and impacts of teacher leadership work. Intermediary outcomes include having a positive impact on teacher learning and classroom practices.

The York-Barr and Duke (2004) model suggests a linear progression of essential components of teacher leadership; that is, the model suggests that various components lead to subsequent components to allow teacher leadership to develop. For example, teacher leaders being respected as teachers, being learning oriented, and possessing leadership capacities, along with the leadership work being valued, visible, negotiated, and shared, go hand in hand with the conditions of teacher leadership, such as a supportive culture and principal, time and resources, and development opportunities. The model suggests then that once these components are established, the means of teacher leadership can be established that will in turn target individuals, teams or groups, and organizational capacity. Finally, the model implies that as a result of the previous components, intermediate outcomes of improved teacher learning and practices can develop and in turn may produce the ultimate outcome of improved student learning.

The themes identified in this study are similar in many ways to the components of teacher leadership identified in the York-Barr and Duke (2004) model, although slightly different terminology is used. However, there are also some significant differences. For example, York-
Barr and Duke’s component “leadership work” relates to the visibility and valuing by others of teacher leader work as a sort of prerequisite to effective teacher leadership. This study’s thematic categories do not address this topic. In addition, there are some differences in focus within the other components, which will be discussed below. Table 2 below illustrates the degree of alignment between the themes found in this study and the York-Barr and Duke model.

Table 2

York-Barr and Duke Model Components (2004) in Comparison with this Study’s Thematic Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>York-Barr &amp; Duke Model (2004)</th>
<th>Thematic Categories Identified from This Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Leaders</td>
<td>Teacher Leader Dispositions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Work</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditions</td>
<td>The Context of Teacher Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Means of Leadership Influence</td>
<td>Means of Teacher Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Targets of Leadership Influence</td>
<td>Purposes of Teacher Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediary Outcomes of Leadership</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A thematic category in this study, “teacher leader dispositions,” corresponds to a degree with York-Barr and Duke’s (2004) component termed “teacher leaders.” The category in this study, “teacher leader dispositions,” relates primarily to characteristics of the teacher leaders and includes the themes: Oriented toward service, value interpersonal relationships, motivated to learn, take responsibility, focused on students, and hold strong educational beliefs. The York-Barr and Duke component “teacher leaders” does address teacher leaders characteristics in describing teacher leaders as learning oriented and having leadership capacity. However, it also focuses on reactions of others to the teacher leaders, i.e. that they are “respected as teachers,” which is not a characteristic or disposition of the teacher leaders per se. The component of the
York-Barr and Duke model termed “leadership work” suggests the work has particular
characteristics such as valued, visible, negotiated, and shared. As previously mentioned, this
component does not correspond directly to the findings of this study. Next, the category in this
study, “context of teacher leadership,” corresponds to the York-Barr and Duke component of
teacher leadership termed “conditions,” which is described by a supportive culture, supportive
principal, time, resources, and development opportunities. By contrast this study describes the
“context of teacher leadership” in terms of principal leadership, school culture and climate,
students and community, and educational reform. Yet another component of the York-Barr and
Duke model, “means of leadership influence,” corresponds with this study’s theme category,
“means of teacher leadership.” York-Barr and Duke describe means of leadership influence as
maintaining a focus on teaching and learning, establishing trusting relationships, and interacting
through formal and informal points of influence. Alternatively, this study describes the means of
teacher leadership in terms of being prepared and responsible, building relationships, researching
and learning, using data and results, collaborating, and distributing leadership.

The final three themes in the York-Barr and Duke (2004) model include “targets of
leadership influence,” “intermediary outcomes of leadership, and “student learning. These three
themes together correspond to the theme category in this study termed “purposes of teacher
leadership. York-Barr and Duke’s theme “targets of leadership influence” implies that
individuals, teams or groups, and organizational capacity will be changed or transformed through
teacher leadership. The theme “intermediary outcomes of leadership” suggests that a purpose of
teacher leadership is to improve teacher learning and practice. The final theme is simply “student
learning,” which York-Barr and Duke submit as the ultimate outcome or purpose of teacher
leadership. By comparison, once again, together these three York-Barr and Duke themes
correspond to the theme category “purposes of teacher leadership” in this study, which includes the themes, improve student learning, improve instruction, and influence school culture.

While there are similarities between the thematic findings of this study and the York-Barr and Duke model, this study adds to their model as well as other concepts in the literature on teacher leadership. While the York-Barr and Duke model implies a linear relationship among the components of teacher leadership, this study emphasizes the interactive, interdependent nature of the various components of teacher leadership identified in this study. This interdependence among the various components is illustrated in a conceptual model that will be presented in the following section.

An Interactive Conceptual Model for Teacher Leadership

Emerging from the thematic analysis in Chapter 5 is a model of teacher leadership that adds to the extant literature by emphasizing the interactive, interdependent nature of the components of teacher leadership identified in this study. Specifically, the analysis revealed that the four thematic categories—dispositions of teacher leaders, the purposes of teacher leadership, the means of teacher leadership, and the context of teacher leadership—are related and interdependent as they interact and influence each other. This interaction is dynamic and therefore each of the components of teacher leadership may change over time. Figure 1 is an illustration of this interactive model for teacher leadership and is explained in the following paragraphs.
Figure 1: An Interactive Model of the Components of Teacher Leadership

First, the model illustrates that teacher leadership is expressed within and is interactive with the context of the school and school district. As described in the thematic analysis, elements of the context that were most salient and influential for the teachers in this study were principal leadership, school culture and climate, students and community, and educational reform. This
context was described by the participants as complex and sometimes limiting in terms of the scope and expression of their teacher leadership practice. School leaders, especially the principal, emerged as an important contextual element that fostered or prevented distributed and teacher leadership to emerge. In addition, the community’s expectations as well as its influences on students’ attitudes, goals, and expectations about school were declared by the teacher leaders to be factors that can limit as well as support their leadership. Beyond the school level, policy and school reform efforts emanating from the federal, state, and school district levels were said to have limiting as well as supportive influences on their leadership work. It is as though the context of the school serves as a kind of atmospheric pressure on teacher leadership, limiting and buoying the expression of the teacher leaders’ dispositions, their purposes, and their means of leadership.

Next, each teacher leader, depending on individual strengths and characteristics, is affected somewhat differently by the context. Therefore, expression of teacher leadership becomes distributed across the teacher leaders who work together. For example, a teacher leader may be more comfortable and adept within the school context in performing organizational details, reporting, and preparing documents and will assume these kinds of tasks as the teacher leaders distribute leadership tasks among themselves. Another teacher leader may have some specific expertise, such as a reading specialty, and will share that expertise with other teachers who lack and need to acquire such knowledge and skills. Another teacher may be especially adept at analyzing data and be called upon to share that analysis as a means to influence attitudes and beliefs about a particular learning or instructional problem.

Finally, each teacher leaders’ dispositions, purposes for leadership, and means of leadership interact somewhat uniquely for that individual. For example, a teacher leader’s
disposition toward helping others may influence her purpose toward improving conditions for students who need more help to succeed. Similarly, a disposition of valuing relationships might influence a teacher leader to use the means of relationships in the form of networks of collaborators and coalitions of supporters to advance her work. Further, a teacher leader with a disposition toward taking responsibility will be more likely to take action as a means of leadership in the face of a perceived problem rather than to wait for someone else to take the initiative to act. Therefore, the nature of the teacher leadership expressed by each of the teacher leaders appears to be partly shaped by interactions of that teacher’s unique profile of dispositions, purposes of leadership, and means of leadership. In sum, components of teacher leadership—dispositions, purposes, and means—interacting within the contextual situation shaped the expression of teacher leadership and resulted in leadership being distributed within this set of teacher leaders. Teacher leadership, therefore, is viewed from this study as a dynamic phenomenon that develops and is expressed through interactions among various players and contextual circumstances.

Heuristic Approach to the Study and Actions Taken

According to Moustakas (1990), “Heuristics is a way of engaging in scientific search through methods and processes aimed at discovery; a way of self-inquiry and dialogue with others aimed at find the underlying meanings of important human experiences” (p. 15). Etherington (2004) described heuristics as a reflexive methodology and explains, “reflexive methodologies seem to be close to the hearts and minds of practitioners who value using themselves in all areas of their practice (including research) and who also value transparency in relationships” (p. 48). Moustakas (1990) claims that heuristic research “requires a passionate, disciplined commitment to remain with a question intensely and continuously until it is
illuminated or answered” (p. 15). In this study, I adopted an heuristic approach in order to learn from and along with the teacher leader participants. I wanted to learn, as the superintendent, ways in which I could support the work of the teacher leaders in this study as well as understand teacher leadership generally and better support other emerging teacher leaders.

The themes that emerged from this study, especially those related to the context of the school, illuminated barriers to as well as supports for teacher leadership work. For example, the teacher leaders in this study indicated a strong social and relational component in their work. They said that time for collaboration is a necessary condition to support their work. This suggests that resources, including dedicated time, needs to be provided and imbedded within the district to support the emergence and effectiveness of teacher leadership. In addition, the teachers were quite explicit in naming support from the school principal as a critical factor that supported their work.

Based on these preliminary insights I initiated a process that I hoped would begin to build supports in the system for teacher leadership. Based on the data I identified questions for the administrative team to consider. The team consisted of seven school principals, the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instructional programs, executive director of financial and support services, and the director of information technology. The purpose of the questions was to begin to bring individuals together as a team and to begin to establish a common focus and purpose to the work of the team. This was related to the sense of purpose and focus that was modeled by the teacher leaders when they established their focus on improving student learning among a specific population of students. The questions were first posed through a book study in which we read and discussed Lieberman and Miller’s (2004) book, *Teacher Leadership*. This led to team members raising their own questions and a series of book studies initiated by them on
related topics such as professional collaborative work, the value of having a common shared focus on student learning, establishing positive teams, and using data and results to inform instruction and school improvement. The book studies included planned discussion questions intended to evoke reflection and dialogue regarding implications for our local situation and specifically focused on improving student achievement. To help connect the administrative team discussions tightly to the local context, as an adjunct to the formal interview process for this study, I conducted an interview process throughout the district, inviting any teacher in the district who would share his or her perspective with me regarding their work with students and the support they were receiving or lacking. I collected and collated these notes into themes and shared them with members of the leadership team.

Through these experiences, the administrative team developed a consensus that there was a lack of factual understanding about the local situation and that this was contributing to a lack of common purpose through which decisions could be make. That led to a decision among the team to analyze existing demographic and achievement data, and to collect other data that appeared to be missing, specifically perceptual data. A consultant, who reported his findings to the school board and administrators, analyzed existing assessment data. These analyses of the district’s data helped to inform a strategic action planning process. Furthermore, the team concluded that perceptual data about the school and school district were lacking. To collect this data, a survey, aligned with research in the state and reported in *Nine Characteristics of High Performing Schools* (OSPI, 2007), was administered to students, staff, and parents. The analysis of the data, provided by the same contractor who analyzed the district’s existing data, further informed the next action that the administrative team undertook. The team helped me and other district staff to develop and carry out a strategic action planning process intended to establish a common and
articulated purpose and vision for the district along with specific actions that would be implemented to move the district toward its identified purpose and vision.

The administrative team’s work and influence further played a role in establishing the need to develop a system-wide focus on improving student learning that was reflected in a strategic action plan. To launch the strategic action planning process, the administrative team invited representatives that included teachers, classified support staff, community members, business people, and school board members to join in a process modeled primarily after the work of DuFour and Eaker (1998) called *Professional Learning Communities at Work*. The DuFour and Eaker model provided practical guidance for establishing a common purpose and establishing collaborative learning communities among educators. After about 18 months working in the process, the planning team established a strategic mission, vision, and purpose, along with a set of commitments and actionable goals that were accepted by the school board. The action plan that emerged from this process was subsequently implemented (see Appendix I).

The action plan that was developed and implemented as a result of the strategic action planning process focused on improving student learning through collaboration among educators using results to inform decisions. Three main actions were undertaken. First, the teacher association agreed to take a step toward developing common collaborative time for teachers and administrators. Two independent non-instructional workday options were converted to two common collaborative days district-wide. The district further committed a fund to support ongoing school site collaboration and teacher leadership through release time and compensation options for time extending beyond the teachers’ contract. Next, workshops involving representatives from each school were conducted to provide knowledge and practice in systematic collaborative protocols and processes among teachers as well as administrators.
Along with this a study was initiated to discover ways to establish dedicated time within the school day for instructional collaboration. The third major action involved creating a district-wide math team and a math coordinator to facilitate collaborative work among teachers based on a priority established in the strategic action plan to improve math achievement. This professional development initiative relied on the learning and practice gained from the collaborative workshops mentioned above.

These actions taken as a result of this heuristic study resulted in teacher leadership emerging among the teachers involved with the district math team as well as within teacher teams established at individual school sites. For example, the math coordinator, with the guidance and assistance from the district math team, facilitated grade band collaboration that involved every teacher in the elementary grades. This collaboration provided teachers and administrator with opportunities to reflect upon contextual data as they learn to apply new math standards and new instructional strategies more consistently and to target local learning needs. The outcome and product of this collaboration established agreed upon alignment of the curriculum across individual classes and established a clear scope and sequence between grade levels. In addition, small groups of teachers with the support of their school principal began to establish school collaboration targeting specific needs related to mathematics as well as other learning needs in their school. Furthermore, other teacher leaders have stepped forward to help the assistant superintendent study and develop a proposal to implement common collaboration time. These examples show an increased awareness among administrators and teachers of the value of the distributed nature of teacher leadership, thus creating momentum for district and school site administrators to support this kind of work.
Reflections on actions taken and their impact continue to provide new insights, knowledge, and understandings. Since the study took place within the context of my workplace and followed a heuristic approach, the impact of the study has diffused into my work with the school board, administrative team, and interactions with other teachers throughout the district. This heuristic approach turned out to be both a blessing and an aggravation. Benefits to the high school and school district came about because those involved gained opportunities to learn and improve the results of their practice as a result of action taken. In a nutshell, the study led to improvements in support for teacher leadership and collaboration. Furthermore, there is evidence that, during the period that the four teacher leaders worked to improve student learning, student achievement did improve among the students the teacher leaders had targeted for improvement (see Appendices G). On the other hand, it is difficult to study what you live. Throughout the study, I experienced a persistent desire to explore concepts and insights generated from the study with other colleagues in addition to the four participants. Tangents to the study provided ready distractions and opportunities to expand and complicate the study. Because of this, it was challenging to keep the study focused and to keep the reporting aimed strictly toward the research problem and questions. By acknowledging and confronting these potential pitfalls, and with the persistent involvement and wise guidance from my advisor, the study and this report have been able to remain focused on the purposes of the study.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study focused on four teacher leaders who assumed a specific and common leadership purpose at one high school site. The study therefore is narrow in its scope and application beyond the specific context of the study is limited. It would be helpful, therefore, to expand the scope of investigation and further explore the findings of this study.
In regard to this specific study, the scope of the study could be broadened by including more teacher leaders and additional school sites. The interactive model of teacher leadership components developed in this study could be used as a guide for expanded research. Further, longitudinal research to determine the impact and sustainability of actions as a result of the study could be helpful. The actions taken as a result of this study arose from the suggestion that they would support teacher leadership and improve instruction and student learning. Assessment of the results of those actions could provide further evidence whether or not these actions actually result in changes in instruction and improvements in student learning.

More generally, a longitudinal study of the efforts and initiatives of a school district to provide resources and structures to support the emergence of teacher leadership would be useful. Since any specific context is dynamic, a better understanding is needed about the ways in which changes in the context—how it develops over time—impact the sustainability of school and district initiatives to support teacher leadership. For example, this study clearly highlighted the importance of principal support to the emergence, effectiveness, and sustainability of teacher leadership. It could be useful to learn what happens to teacher leadership when principal turnover occurs.

Several writers have placed great hope in the concept of teacher leadership to improve schools and student learning. Systematic investigation of the linkages between teacher leadership and student learning are needed to establish the efficacy of teacher leadership to deliver desired outcomes. Discussed in earlier chapters, teacher leadership is described in several different forms such as specific roles assigned precise tasks or duties, emerging leadership that addresses contextual situations, and research and learning. A greater understanding is needed about which forms of teacher leadership lead to improving learning outcomes and in what kind of situations.
The four individual teachers who were selected to participate in this study were chosen because they emerged to provide leadership in their school for a specific purpose. The study identified personal dispositions, some of which were common to all four of the teacher leaders. It could be valuable to explore whether or not there are personality profiles that influence teachers’ emergence as leaders in their schools. There are studies that profile leaders in a more general sense. It may prove valuable to know if the personality profiles applied to other forms of leadership show relevance for teacher leadership in a similar manner.

Finally, the interactive and relational nature of teacher leadership uncovered in this study indicates a need for research using social network analysis. This study concludes that teacher leadership exists within schools in a distributed manner. Therefore, it could be useful to gain a better understanding of how distributed social and leadership networks operate within the unique culture of schools. Further study using social network analysis methods may prove fruitful in providing administrators and teacher leaders with the understanding needed to expand and improve teacher leadership in schools. Schools are social organizations with unique structures, cultures, and challenges. Understanding of how social networks support and detract from the professional, collaborative practice of teaching and teacher leadership is needed.

Concluding Remarks

The promise of teacher leadership is great. The potential benefits to improving schools and student learning was demonstrated through the work of the four teacher leaders who participated in this study. They showed that there is capacity among teachers for teacher leadership and that it can help lead to improved results. However, it is apparent that the current system common in many high schools presents significant barriers to the needed time, resources, and structures important for the support of teacher leadership. Policy makers and school leaders
are needed who will establish guidance, create structures, and allocate resources necessary to support the kind of professional practice and leadership exemplified by these four teacher leaders and described by Lieberman and Miller (2004), who said that teacher leadership is

...about teachers who take leadership in their school, whether formally or informally, and learn how to turn educational policy into constructive practice. It is about building a new view of teaching and community. It is about building a professional ethos that respects diversity, confronts differences, represents sensitivity to and engagement with the whole life of students and the adults who teach them. (p. 13)
REFERENCES


Harris, A., (2003). Teacher leadership as distributed leadership: Heresy, fantasy or possibility? 


Murphy, J. (2000). Governing America’s schools: The shifting playing field. *The Teachers College Record, 102*(1), 57-84.


OSPI, 2007. The nine characteristics of high-performing schools, Prepared by G. Sue Shannon, Senior Researcher, Pete Bylsma, former Director, Research, Assessment, Accountability. Assessment and Student Information, *Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction*.


APPENDIX A

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
CONSENT FORM
Dissertation Research

Researcher:  Paul R. Sturm
Faculty Advisor:  Gail C Furman

Researcher’s Statement
We are asking you to participate in a research study. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether to be in the study or not. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what we would ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When we have answered all your questions, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called “informed consent.” We will give you a copy of this form for your records.

PURPOSE AND BENEFITS
The purpose of this qualitative, portraiture, study is to explore the lived experiences of four teacher leaders working to address the learning needs of low achieving students attending a “high performing” high school. The study seeks to bring these teachers’ voices to the fore in the conversation about teacher leadership. It will explore their personal histories, characteristics, and dispositions and seek to express what works within their setting and context.

PROCEDURES
You will be asked to answer several interview questions and provide the investigator with other documentation related to the research question stated above. The interview will be audio-taped and field notes taken during the interviews. The interviews will be scheduled at your convenience for no more that two hours at a time with the potential for follow-up interviews that will also be scheduled at your convenience. In addition, you will be asked to participate in a focus group interview with other study participants. You may refuse to answer any question and you may stop the interview at any time. Supplying requested documentation is voluntary. Your responses, the investigator’s field notes, and documents you provide will be kept confidential. However, while pseudonyms will be used in the report of the study, it is possible that confidentiality cannot be entirely assured due to the nature of the study (i.e., the researcher is a co-worker with the study participants and the participants will be asked to participate together in a focus group interview).

RISKS, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT
If you experience any discomfort or stress from the interview or observation, you may stop it at any time.

Participant’s Statement
This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have general questions about the research, I can ask one of the researchers listed above. If I have questions regarding my rights as a participant, I can call the WSU Institutional Review Board at (509) 335-9661. I understand that this project has been reviewed and approved for human participation by the WSU IRB. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

_________________________      ________________________       ________________
Printed Name                  Signature                  Date
APPENDIX B
WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
CONSENT FORM
Dissertation Research
Focus Group Interview

Primary Investigator: Gall C. Furman - phone: (509) 358-7568 - e-mail: gfurman@wsu.edu
Co-investigator: Paul R. Sturm - phone: (509) 339-3117 - e-mail: psturm@psd267.wednet.edu

Investigator’s Statement
We are asking you to participate in a research study. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether to be in the study or not. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what we would ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When we have answered all your questions, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called “informed consent.” We will give you a copy of this form for your records.

PURPOSE AND BENEFITS
The purpose of this qualitative, portraiture, study is to explore the lived experiences of four teacher leaders working to address the learning needs of low achieving students attending a “high performing” high school. The study seeks to bring these teachers’ voices to the fore in the conversation about teacher leadership. It will explore their personal histories, characteristics, and dispositions and seek to express what works within their setting and context.

PROCEDURES
As participants in this study already, you are now asked to participate in a focus group, or interactive group, interview with the other participants in the same study. There will be specific questions to guide the interview, but your responses and those of the other participants may also serve to direct the interview. Your participation in this focus group interview will preclude the confidentiality of your responses with the other participants during this focus group interview. However, in the reporting of the study, pseudonyms will continue to be used so that confidentiality beyond the four participants will be protected.

RISKS, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT
If you experience any discomfort or stress as a result of the interview, you may stop and be excused from participating at any time.

Participant’s Statement
This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have general questions about the research, I can ask one of the researchers listed above. If I have questions regarding my rights as a participant, I can call the WSU Institutional Review Board at (509) 335-3668. I understand that this project has been reviewed and approved for human participation by the WSU IRB. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s Printed Name</th>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>PI Printed Name</td>
<td>Signature</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-PI Printed Name</td>
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WSU IRB # 9123-005
Approved: 6/2/2008
Valid until: 5/31/2009
### Characteristics of Teacher Leader Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Leader</th>
<th>Tammy Thomason</th>
<th>Rhonda Johns</th>
<th>Suzanne Summers</th>
<th>Hazel Shoultes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td>female</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>female</td>
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<td>Years teaching</td>
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<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of different schools</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Middle School</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>High School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects taught</td>
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<td>P.E Art</td>
<td>9-12 Math</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Language Arts</td>
<td>Computer</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>programming</td>
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<td>History</td>
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<td>Science</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Math</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational positions held in addition to classroom teacher</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Librarian Assistant Principal</td>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW GUIDES

Individual Interview Questions

♦ Why did you choose to become a teacher?

♦ How would you describe yourself as a teacher?

♦ What have been the major influences on you as a teacher?

♦ Overall, how has the experience of teacher been for you?

♦ How do you describe your high school?

♦ How has TRHS changed in recent years, and why?

♦ Would you describe the relationships you have with other teachers, administrators, and staff?

♦ Tell me about your work with students who are not meeting the state standards.

♦ What motivated you to take on this work?

♦ How have you gone about it?

♦ What has worked? How do you know? Why do you think it has worked?

♦ What has been helpful?

♦ What would be an improvement? What would help you more?

♦ What do you predict will be the future of the project?

♦ Do you influence others, and if so, who and how?

♦ Do you see yourself taking the lead in things? Tell me about that (what, how, why, frustrations, satisfactions, successes)

♦ What else do you want to tell me about working with students who struggle to meet the state standards at TRHS?
Focus Group Interview Questions

♦ Describe how the idea of the Fundamentals project came about, and how it has evolved.

♦ What has made it successful?

♦ What might make it more successful?

♦ Describe the relationships among the Fundamentals teachers.

♦ How would you describe the relationships between the Fundamentals teachers and other staff?

♦ How do you hope to see the project evolve?

♦ What will be your roll in the project in the future?
Figure 2: Teacher Leadership: A Conceptual Framework (Adapted From York-Barr & Duke, 2004)
APPENDIX F

TENTH GRADE READING AND MATH:
STATE ASSESSMENT TRENDS

Figure 3: Tenth Grade Reading and Math: State Assessment Trends
Figure 4: Percent of Grade Ten Students Passing Sections of the Washington State Assessment of Student Learning (adapted from analysis completed for the District by the Center Educational Effectiveness, Inc., Redmond WA)
Figure 5: Reading & Math Performance Compared To Schools with Similar Levels of Poverty (adapted from analysis completed for the District by the Center Educational Effectiveness, Inc., Redmond, WA)
## APPENDIX I

### DISTRICT STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN

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**Ensuring learning while challenging each student to achieve full potential is the mission of the Three Rivers School District.**

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### Strategic Plan Goals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District Goal #1: Establish and maintain a clear and shared focus throughout the district.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objectives:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>⇒ Establish continual improvement through strategic planning</td>
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<tr>
<td>⇒ Align school and department improvement plans with district strategic plan</td>
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</table>

### Action Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Align curriculum, assessment and instruction</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>By 2009-2010, the district will apply the Deep Alignment process to align curriculum, instruction, and assessment with state standards in math as a model for future application to all curriculum areas.</td>
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</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Focus professional development</th>
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<tr>
<td>By 2010, the district will have a prioritized and implemented professional development plan for math to address state standards and deficits in instruction based on student assessment data. This plan will serve as a model for future application to all instructional areas.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Develop high levels of communication and collaboration</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>By June 2010, we will build and implement a framework for effective collaboration, communication, and teamwork among students, staff, parents, and community.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Monitor teaching and learning frequently</th>
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<tr>
<td>In the fall of 2010, instruction will be focused on improving student achievement and meeting individual learning needs through Powerful Teaching and Learning (PTL) as measured by the Skills, Thinking, Applications &amp; Relationships (STAR) protocol.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### Vision

The Three Rivers School District mission provides a clear and shared focus for all stakeholders. This common understanding underscores our vision that we each have a stake in student learning and achievement. To fulfill this vision, the District targets its human and fiscal resources toward continuous improvement.

Excellence, measured by results, is evident in all we do and is inclusive of work, programs, and facilities.

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