2-2005

Transformational classroom leadership: developing the teacher leadership notion

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Recommended Citation
TRANSFORMATIONAL CLASSROOM LEADERSHIP: 
DEVELOPING THE TEACHER LEADERSHIP NOTION

ABSTRACT

The literature on teacher-leadership suggests that the notion has developed over time and some have argued that this development comprises three stages or ‘waves’ that progressively de-link the idea from the formal organizational hierarchy. The third wave emphasizes that teacher-leadership is a process rather than a positional concept and notes that teacher-leaders tend to possess many of the characteristics of transformational leaders. The literature also suggests that third wave teacher-leaders are excellent classroom instructors. This paper described a Hong Kong study that explored the relationship between the exercise of transformational leadership in the university classroom and student perception of the quality of their classroom instruction. In a university setting, the results indicate that a fourth wave of teacher-leadership could include transformational classroom leadership as one of the defining qualities of a teacher-leader.

Keywords: transformational leadership, classroom leadership, student evaluation of teaching, multifactor leadership questionnaire
INTRODUCTION

The notion of teacher-leadership has come to prominence in the educational literature primarily within the last two decades (Little, 2003). The notion owes much of its currency to the school improvement movement that began in the same period and has encompassed nations such as the US, Canada, UK and Australia that have in common, publicly funded systems of education (Chui et al., 1996). This article examines how the teacher-leadership idea has developed over the years and, with reference to a Hong Kong study, argues that transformational classroom leadership is a logical extension of the teacher-leadership construct.

TEACHER-LEADERSHIP

The teacher-leadership notion has developed over time and Silva et al. (2000) have argued that this development comprises three stages or ‘waves’. The first wave confined teacher-leadership within the formal organizational hierarchy and merely placed the concept close to the teaching function. Therefore, in this wave, the department head was the archetypical teacher-leader. This was a control model with teacher-leaders managing teachers who were viewed as mere implementers of the formers’ decisions (Frymier, 1987). The second wave of teacher-leadership placed more emphasis on the instructional dimension of the teaching function but still vested teacher-leadership in formally created organizational positions such as team leader and curriculum developer. Despite moving the concept out of the realm of the conventional organizational hierarchy, the second wave separated out leadership from the teaching function and still emphasized control with curriculum developers and instructional designers creating prepackaged materials for classroom teachers to implement. This approach has been described as the “remote controlling of teachers” (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Shulman, 1987).

The third wave and arguably the current view of teacher-leadership integrates the notions of teaching and leadership. It is a process rather than a positional concept and recognizes that teachers, in the process of carrying out their duties, should be given the opportunity to express their leadership capabilities in the school. This conceptualization of teacher-leadership is grounded on professionalism and collegiality and is a label reserved for
those teachers who improve a school’s educational climate by engaging colleagues in various activities designed to enhance the educational process. Wasley (1991), in Silva et al. (2000), for instance, views teacher-leaders as those who “help redesign schools, mentor their colleagues, engage in problem solving at the school level, and provide professional growth activities for colleagues” (p. 5).

When teacher-leadership is conceived of as a process rather than a positional concept, it is more difficult to articulate because it comprises an array of behaviours and characteristics rather than formalized positional duties. Nevertheless, various attempts have been made to articulate the elements of third wave teacher-leadership. For example, Silva et al. (2000) have emphasized the ability of the teacher-leader to “navigate the structures of schools, nurture relationships, model professional growth, encourage change, and challenge the status quo” (p. 22). Sherrill (1999) has argued that the core expectations of a teacher-leader are exemplary classroom instruction and sound pedagogical knowledge coupled with an understanding of the theory of learning and of effective classroom practices. Furthermore, according to Sherrill, the teacher-leader should possess research based knowledge about teaching and learning. On the basis of this knowledge and understanding, the teacher-leader should then cultivate desired dispositions in colleagues by engaging in reflective inquiry.

Darling-Hammond et al. (1995) have emphasized that teacher-leaders are open to new ways of doing things and are modelers of learning with a view to improving students’ educational experience. Berry and Ginsberg (1990) have identified the following three components of the role of what they have termed “lead teachers”: (1) mentoring and coaching other teachers; (2) professional development and review of school practice, and (3) school level decision making. Lieberman and co-authors (1988) identified 18 skills that they felt characterized teacher-leaders. They classified these skills as follows:

- Building trust and rapport
- Organizational diagnosis
- Dealing with the process
- Using resources
- Managing the work
- Building skill and confidence in others
More recently, the third wave of teacher-leadership has been articulated by Alma Harris and co-authors as “the exercise of leadership by teachers regardless of position or designation” (Frost and Harris, 2003, p. 482) with a “focus upon improving learning” (Harris and Muijs, 2003, p. 40) based upon a type of leadership that stems from “professional collaboration, development and growth” (ibid., p. 40). For Harris and Muijs, teacher-leadership involves:

“ - the leadership of other teachers through coaching, mentoring, leading working groups;
- the leadership of developmental tasks that are central to improving learning and teaching; and
- the leadership of pedagogy through the development and modeling of effective forms of teaching”

(ibid., p.40)

Despite attempt at articulating the characteristics of teacher-leadership, few studies have attempted to place the teacher-leadership notion within the framework of current theories of leadership. One exception is Crowther’s (1997) study of teacher-leadership in a socially disadvantaged setting. Crowther describes teacher-leaders as “individuals acclaimed not only for their pedagogical excellence, but also for their influence in stimulating change and creating improvement in the schools and socio-economically disadvantaged communities in which they work” (p. 6). His criteria for selecting participants in his study convey his particular conceptualization of teacher-leadership as it is manifested in a situation of socio-economic deprivation. The criteria are:

• Concrete evidence of a significant contribution to an aspect of social justice in the school or school community
• Highly esteemed in the community, particularly among socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals and groups.
• Recognized by colleagues as very influential in school decision-making processes
• Accoded a high level of school-based responsibility by colleagues and the school administration.
Crowther’s study indicated that his teacher-leader subjects displayed leadership qualities that are broadly transformational in nature (Bass, 1985). For example, they tended to have a deep commitment to a set of core values that they were prepared to communicate openly. All the teacher-leaders studied displayed an enthusiasm that was contagious, and the ability to inspire others and raise their expectations. A review of other attempts to define teacher-leadership also indicates an affinity with transformational leadership. Thus, Silva and co-authors’ (2000) description of teacher-leaders as nurturers of relationships, models of professional growth, encouragers of change, and challengers of the status quo, reflects the spirit of the transformational leadership concept. Similarly, the teacher-leader qualities emphasized by Darling-Hammond et al. (1995) such as openness to new ways of doing things and the modeling of learning reflect aspects of transformational leadership. Furthermore, the mentoring, coaching and developmental aspects of Berry and Ginsburg’s (1990) view of teacher-leaders are totally consistent with the transformational leadership notion.

In summary, third wave teacher-leaders influence colleagues without the formal trappings of leadership but by virtue of a commitment to values, the modeling of behaviour, the ability to inspire others, by a nurturing of relationships, through mentoring and coaching and by encouraging change. All these qualities, characteristics and approaches are reminiscent of the transformational leadership construct (Bass, 1985). Noting Sherrill’s (1999) argument that one of the core expectations of a teacher-leader is exemplary classroom instruction and Crowther’s (1997) reference to the pedagogical excellence of teacher-leaders, an examination of leadership in the classroom appears to be a logical extension of research on teacher-leadership. Furthermore, despite the fact the work of teacher-leadership largely emanates from the school context, there is no reason to confine the notion to this context alone because the type of third wave teacher-leadership characteristics described above appears to be relevant to any educational organization including that of a university.

One possible explanation of the connection between the characteristics of teacher-leaders described above and their ‘exemplary classroom instruction’ is that teacher-leaders display their transformational leadership characteristics in the classroom and this gives rise to excellent classroom performance. However, this explanation suggests that there is a positive relationship between the exercise of transformational leadership in the classroom and classroom performance and it is this relationship that was examined in the Hong Kong study. In a university setting, assessment of classroom performance revolves around student
evaluation of teaching (SET) because, despite arguments over its accuracy, this is the prime measure of the quality of classroom instruction (Comm & Mathaisel, 1998; Magner, 1997; Seldin, 1993; 1984; Wilson (1998). There is, however, a paucity of research on the effects of transformational leadership in a university classroom setting. The Hong Kong study, therefore, explored student perceptions of the effects of full range leadership (containing the transformational-transactional leadership characteristics) in the university classroom. The study should be regarded as an initial excursion into extending the teacher-leadership conceptualization into the classroom. This is because the study was confined to establishing the extent to which university teachers (whether or not they met the teacher-leadership criteria) demonstrating transformational leadership characteristics in the classroom were well received by their students and thus likely to be regarded as excellent classroom instructors. What follows is a description of the characteristics of full range leadership, the beneficial effects of its application reported in the literature and a synopsis of the Hong Kong study. The paper ends by noting the limitations of the study and also indicating possible ways forward in research on teacher-leadership.

**Full Range or Transformational-Transactional Leadership**

A resurgence of interest in leadership began in the mid 1980’s revolving around the notion of full range or transformational-transactional leadership. Studies generally suggest that transformational leadership in particular produces desirable leadership outcomes often measured in terms of subordinates’ satisfaction with the leader and their assessment of the leader’s skills (Avolio and Howell, 1992; Bass, 1985; Hater and Bass, 1988; Seltzer and Bass, 1990). The transformational leadership concept is presented below:

a. **Idealized Influence or Charisma**: The leader provides vision and a sense of mission, instills pride, gains respect, trust and increases optimism. Such a leader excites and inspires subordinates. This dimension is a measure of the extent of followers’ admiration and respect for the leader.

b. **Inspirational Motivation**: The leader acts as a model for subordinates, communicates a vision and uses symbols to focus efforts. This dimension is a measure of the leader’s ability to engender confidence in the leader’s vision and values.
c. *Individual Consideration:* The leader coaches and mentors, provides continuous feedback and links organizational members’ needs to the organization’s mission. Individual consideration is a measure of the extent to which the leader cares about the individual follower’s concerns and developmental needs.

d. *Intellectual Stimulation:* The leader stimulates followers to rethink old ways of doing things and to reassess their old values and beliefs. This dimension is concerned with the degree to which followers are provided with interesting and challenging tasks and encouraged to solve problems in their own way.

(Source: Den Hartog et al., 1997; Hinkin and Tracey, 1999)

The notion of full range leadership means that transformational leadership cannot be considered in isolation from an associated concept, namely, transactional leadership because it is argued that transformational leadership is built on the foundations of transactional leadership (Bass 1985). The term full range leadership conveys the idea that leaders, in practice, are likely to display some or all of the transformational-transactional leadership characteristics. However, effective leaders are felt to be those that display more of the active and less of the passive full range leadership behaviors (Sosik et al., 2002). Although aspects of transactional leadership are viewed as active forms of leadership concerned with the achievement of goals, most leadership writing implies, or explicitly argues, that transactional leadership in general is an inferior form of leadership when compared with transformational leadership.

Dimensions of transactional leadership are as follows:

a. *Contingent Reinforcement or Contingent Reward:* The leader’s rewards to followers are contingent on them achieving specified performance levels.

b. *Active Management by Exception:* The leader actively seeks out deviations from desired performance on the part of subordinates with a view to taking corrective action.

c. *Passive Management by Exception:* The leader does not seek out deviations from desired performance and only takes action when problems present themselves.
d. *Laissez-faire Leadership*: Conceptually distinct from passive management by exception because passive management by exception guards the status quo by exception whilst laissez faire leadership amounts to an abrogation of leadership responsibility.


### The Effects of Full Range Leadership

Strong assertions have been made in leadership literature regarding the beneficial effect of transformational leadership in particular, on subordinates. A number of studies have suggested that transformational leadership has a profound positive influence on subordinates’ effort and satisfaction (Bass and Avolio, 1990; Bycio *et al.*, 1995; Howell and Frost, 1989; Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1996; Parry, 2000). This positive influence has been observed in a variety of contexts including that of health care (Gellis, 2001), commerce (Podsakoff *et al.*, 1990), military (Yammarino and Bass, 1990), and education (Hoover, 1991). Other studies have indicated a positive effect on subordinate performance (Howell and Frost, 1989) particularly in a group or team situation (Avolio *et al.*, 1988, Barling *et al.*, 1996; Den Hartog *et al.*, 1997, Neumann, 1992). Equally, transformational leadership has been linked with enhanced individual commitment to the group or organization (Barling *et al.*, 1996, Bycio *et al.*, 1995). From a subordinate development point of view, the intellectual stimulation dimension of transformational leadership in particular has been associated with challenging subordinates to be creative, think critically and independently and find novel ways of solving problems while seeking a wide range of opinions before deciding upon solutions (Bass, 1998). Further, individualized consideration has been viewed as a vehicle for developing subordinates’ confidence to tackle problems (Bass, 1985). Additionally, Slater and Narver (1995), Farrel (2000) and Coad and Berry (1999) have pointed to enhanced learning resulting from transformational leadership whilst Howell and Higgins (1990), Sosik (1997) and Al-Beraida and Rickards (2003) have found empirical support for the beneficial effects of transformational leadership on innovation and creativity. Finally, Atwater *et al.* (1991), and Parry and Proctor-Thomson (2002) have conducted research that appears to confirm the Carlson and Perrewe (1995) assertion that “transformational leadership is viewed as the best approach for instilling ethical behavior in organizations” (p. 5). The implications for the teacher-leadership notion are immense if it can be demonstrated that the transformational qualities that such leaders possess, when transferred into a classroom setting, have the
potential for engendering enhanced student satisfaction, performance, learning, creativity and ethical behavior. It should be noted that this transferability rests on the argument that a university classroom can be conceived of as a small social organization with teacher as leader and students as followers (Cheng, 1994; Luechauer and Shulman, 2002).

THE HONG KONG STUDY - A SUMMARY OF THE METHOD

Setting

The study was carried out in the Business School of Lingnan University, one of Hong Kong’s eight accredited universities. It focused on the capstone Strategic Management course in the School’s major undergraduate offering which is a Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) programme. At the time of the study, this programme had a total cohort of 876 students spread over three years and Strategic Management was a required course for all final year students. Concentrating the study on one particular course was to ensure that results were not obscured due to differences in course content because studies have indicated that course content can influence student evaluation of instructors (for example, Cashin, 1990; Cranton and Smith, 1986). The Lingnan University Business School was selected in order to facilitate the cooperation needed from the Strategic Management instructors for an approach to evaluating their teaching from a leadership perspective. At the time of the study, the author was one of the instructors responsible for delivering two sections (classes) of the Strategic Management course and was able to draw upon the collegiality of the Strategic Management instructional team to enlist their support for the research.

Sample and Instrument

The sample comprised all the final year students of the BBA Program (n = 285). The choice of final year was consistent with indications in the literature that higher-level students (i.e., those taking higher level courses) are generally more motivated and discriminating in their evaluation of teaching than lower level students (Langbein, 1994). The instrument for data collection was a version of the most recent Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ Form 5x-Short) developed by Bass and Avolio (2000) to measure all nine dimensions of the

* Details of the methodology are available from the author
transformational-transactional or full range leadership model. These nine dimensions are as follows: (a) Idealized Influence (Attributed) (b) Idealized Influence (Behavior) (c) Inspirational Motivation (d) Intellectual Stimulation (e) Individual Consideration (f) Contingent Reward (g) Management-by-Exception (Active) (h) Management–by-Exception (Passive) (h) Laissez-faire Leadership. Descriptions of the dimensions were presented above. The separation of the Idealized Influence/Charisma dimension into (a) and (b) in the MLQ reflects the recommendation by House et al. (1991) and Hunt (1991) that behavioral and attributed Idealized Influence be differentiated on the basis that charisma is demonstrated by leadership behavior and is also a quality attributed to a leader by followers.

The wording of the MLQ Form 5x-Short (Bass and Avolio, 2000) was modified for an instructional setting by the author who brought to this task 20 years experience as a business academic and teacher in Hong Kong universities. These modifications were then scrutinized by a senior university academic and teacher in the field of educational research with a special interest in transformational-transactional leadership, and a university academic and teacher in the field of English language instruction. Further modifications were made as a result of their input. Modifications were also made to the MLQ to take account of the Hong Kong cultural context. For this purpose, Brislin’s (1993) back-translation procedure was employed which involved taking the MLQ modified for a classroom setting as described above, and having it translated into Chinese by a bilingual and then a second bilingual, unfamiliar with the efforts of the first bilingual, translating the Chinese version back into English. This procedure which Brislin (1976) calls ‘decentering’ allows for modifications of both the source language and the target language such that “…the research project is not centered around any one culture or language. Instead, the idiosyncrasies of each language under study contribute to the final version of the questionnaire” (p. 223-224).

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested in the Hong Kong study:

H1: Student ratings of each of the transformational dimensions of classroom leadership (i.e., Idealized Influence (Attributed), Idealized Influence (Behavior), Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, Individual Consideration) will correlate positively and significantly with their ratings of each of the classroom leadership outcomes (i.e., Extra Effort,
The above hypothesis was concerned with establishing the extent to which classroom teachers displaying transformational leadership characteristics were perceived by their students to be producing positive classroom leadership related results as defined in the modified version of the MLQ used in the study. Equally, in order to establish the relationship between transformational classroom leadership and overall student perceptions of the teaching they had received from their transformational classroom teachers i.e., the extent to which students felt that they had received, to coin Sherrill’s (1999) phrase ‘exemplary classroom instruction’, it was necessary to relate the results of the survey to the university SET system. This led to the second hypothesis:

H2: For the teachers and classes involved in the survey, ratings of classroom leadership outcomes resulting from administering the modified MLQ will correlate positively and significantly with SET scores resulting from the university teaching evaluation system.

The Survey

The survey involved five university teachers (four males and one female) and 10 sections (i.e., classes) of students (teachers deliver the course to more than one class). Class sizes ranged from 17 to 34. The survey took place in the 2002/2003 academic year. The instrument was distributed to all students attending the class on the 10th week of a 13 week semester to ensure that students had had sufficient experience of their classroom teachers’ style to enable them to give informed answers to items in the instrument. The instrument allowed for complete anonymity because student names were not required on the questionnaire. 217 usable responses were received giving a response rate of 76%. 94 respondents were male and 123 were female.

Validity and Reliability

Testing of the hypotheses assumed the development of a psychometrically sound classroom leadership instrument based on the MLQ and for this purpose confirmatory factor analysis available on LISREL 8.54 (Joreskog and Sorbom, 2002) was employed with the original full range leadership model (Avolio et al., 1995; 1999; Bass, 1985; Bass and Avolio,
Goodness of fit parameters indicated that the classroom version of the MLQ developed in the Hong Kong study retained the integrity of the original full range leadership model and thus was capable of validly measuring the model in a university classroom setting. Cronbach’s Alpha (Cronbach, 1951) available on SPSS version 11.5. (SPSS, 2002) was employed to test the internal consistency-reliability of the 12 scales (i.e., nine leadership dimension and three leadership outcome scales) comprising the classroom leadership instrument. Alpha scores confirmed that the scales were capable of reliably measuring the various dimensions of full range leadership in the classroom.

**Results and Discussion**

The Hong Kong analysis indicated that scores on each of the transformational classroom leadership dimensions were significantly and positively correlated with scores on each of the classroom leadership outcomes and therefore hypothesis (H1) of the study was supported. As there were ten classes participating in the study, ten mean leadership outcome scores were correlated with ten mean teaching scores resulting from the Lingnan University SET system. Correlations were strong and positive but not significant at the 0.05 level. However, levels of significance are affected by sample size (Frieman et al., 1978; Kirby et al., 2002) and the Hong Kong study, being exploratory in nature, involved a sample of ten classes only. Therefore, hypothesis H2 was partially supported by the analysis i.e., although scores on leadership outcomes were positively correlated with SET scores, none of the correlations were significant. Nevertheless, the analysis did indicate the possibility that a larger sample could fully confirm hypothesis H2.

It should be recalled that the Hong Kong study was the outcome of deliberations on teacher-leadership and it was concluded that teacher-leaders have both transformational leadership and excellent classroom performance in common (Crowther, 1997; Sherrill, 1999). This conclusion gave rise to speculation that the notion of transformational leadership might usefully be examined in a classroom environment on the assumption that teacher-leaders take their transformational leadership qualities into the classroom and that this accounts for the connection between their general transformational style and their excellent classroom performance. In a university context, the Hong Kong study generally indicated that the transformational leadership style is well received by students and perceived by them to be associated with effective classroom performance. Silva et al. (2000) suggested that there have
been three waves of teacher-leadership. This study argues for a potential fourth wave that, in addition to the characteristics of the third wave described earlier in this article, focuses specifically on the teaching process and comprises the employment of transformational leadership in the classroom.

**LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER STUDY**

The obvious limitation of the Hong Kong study was that it was confined to the teachers and students of the one capstone course in one of the eight universities in Hong Kong. Therefore, more work has to be done involving, for example, additional courses and the other Hong Kong universities in order to produce more generalized findings for Hong Kong higher education. Generalizing findings beyond Hong Kong will require the procedure described in this study, or refinements of the procedure, to be carried out in the higher educational system of other countries. Furthermore, the teachers involved in the survey did not necessarily possess the characteristics of teacher-leaders as specified earlier in this paper. Nevertheless, the Hong Kong study has gone some way to establishing that the exercise of transformational leadership qualities in the university classroom does engender positive perceptions of the classroom experience on the part of students. On the assumption that teacher-leaders do display their transformational leadership qualities in the classroom, then this is a possible explanation for the pedagogical excellence exhibited by teacher-leaders (Crowther, 1997; Sherrill, 1999). Certainly in a university context, it is possible to speculate that the fourth wave of teacher-leadership might include the notion of transformational leadership in the classroom as well as the characteristics associated with the third wave. Consequently, future research should examine ways of identifying university teacher-leaders and then investigate their leadership style, and its effects, in the classroom. Aside from the leadership outcomes examined in the Hong Kong study, an interesting area of research would seem to be in the less tangible and more speculative outcomes of transformational leadership in the classroom such as its effects of student learning, creativity and ethical behavior. In summary, it is hoped that the arguments in this article and the results of the Hong Kong study are of interest to scholars in the fields of leadership, education or both and provide them with a platform for further research on the teacher-leadership concept.
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