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Research article

Knowledge and promotion of teacher leadership: An Abu Dhabi exploration

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ABSTRACT

This research is an exploratory, quantitative examination of the knowledge, understanding and promotion of teacher leadership in a public school in the city of Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. Within Abu Dhabi education has become a top priority as it attempts, through a massive reform project, to develop a modern, innovative, world-class system which puts students first. Teacher leadership is thought to be one way in which a reform project can be supported and student learning can be improved. The participants in this study were drawn from an Abu Dhabi all-female primary school with both expatriate and Emirati teachers. Though some dissimilarities between the Emirati and expatriate teachers emerged, overall findings indicated that teacher leadership as it pertains to improving classroom practices through professional development was the focus and preference of teachers. However, they felt that teacher leadership was most commonly represented through teachers performing additional administrative duties. Therefore, professional development opportunities and structures must be developed to allow faculty, both Emirati and expatriate, to emerge as teacher leaders and positively impact school reform and student learning.

Keywords: Abu Dhabi teachers, teacher leadership, Abu Dhabi education, UAE teachers, UAE education, school reform

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INTRODUCTION

Within the UAE and the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, education has become a leading priority as it is recognized as the key element to developing cohorts of Emiratis able to work and contribute meaningfully to an emerging knowledge-based society. This is in evidence through both strategic planning initiatives and the corresponding budgetary allocations of the government. The Emirate of Abu Dhabi uses both the UAE Vision 2021¹ and the Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030² as its strategy documents from which to develop its own plans for education. The Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030 states that education is one of its key drivers for economic development in order to grow a highly skilled workforce. Similarly, UAE Vision 2021 aims to offer people “first-rate education that allows them to develop into well-rounded individuals, enhance their educational attainment, and achieve their true potential, contributing positively to society” (¶ 4.2).¹ Vision 2021 also puts forth 8 *Key Performance Indicators* such as increasing student proficiency on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), international examinations, and on increasing the percentage of high quality teachers and school leaders aligned to the education sector. To help achieve these goals, in the 2013 federal budget, 21% of the allocation went towards education.³

Education in Abu Dhabi is managed by the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC), and in 2009 they launched a 10 year strategic plan building off of the federal and emirate-level vision documents. One of the key components of their long term strategy for the K-12 system is to elevate “the capabilities of school leaders and teachers” (¶ 4).⁴ Part of how this is going to be achieved is through a school reform initiative. Middlebrooks⁵ stressed the significance of teacher leadership in successful school reform projects by reporting that successful administrators recognize teacher leadership as an essential component of effective reform which is linked to improved pedagogical practices. This research takes the perspective that teacher leadership, defined as professional educators engaging, influencing, practicing, facilitating and working with others towards goals which improve classroom practices, is an obvious way for an under reform school system to be improved. Though the study was conducted in Abu Dhabi, research findings are relevant beyond the region to other educational establishments going through educational reform and to developing nations with maturing school systems.

EDUCATION IN ABU DHABI

The formal education system in the UAE is relatively new, but it has and continues to rapidly expand. Starting from almost nothing just over 40 years ago, during the 2012–13 school year there were 265 public schools in Abu Dhabi which enrolled 144,931 Emirati pupils. There were approximately 4000 Emirati teachers, meaning they form about 40% of the total faculty.⁶ This percentage is actually quite high when compared to the Emirate as a whole since Emiratis form only 20% of the total population.⁷ Expatriates have been, and will continue to be, major contributors to the education sector in the Emirate.

For the last few years ADEC has been leading a massive multi-year reform project in the public system to better prepare students for a knowledge economy. The foundation of the school reform project is the *New School Model*, through which the integration of science, math, and English, is expected to drive the system to achieve at the level of high international standards.⁴ The approach to learning is student-centered and aims to improve Arabic and English language literacy as well as critical thinking skills based on a learning outcomes model. The project started in the lower grades and is being cascaded up the system for full implementation by 2016.

The reforms are driven by the acceptance that student learning has not been as effective as would be expected given the investment in education. Recently, results of student learning measured through both the TIMSS and PISA international examinations support this assertion. In 2012, PISA results indicated that UAE 15 year olds consistently ranked in the bottom third internationally for mathematics, reading, and science, while coming 40th of 44 in the problem solving domain.⁸ Similarly on the 2011 TIMSS, UAE 4th and 8th grade students scored consistently below the international average and public school students were outperformed by private school students.⁹

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions of teacher leadership

Teacher leadership is a concept that has grown, but it is also one in which there exists a number of definitions. Katzenmeyer and Moller¹⁰ provided a discourse on the confusion that surrounds the

definition of teacher leadership and the general scarcity of teacher leadership in schools. They claimed that teacher leadership does not have a coherent definition, but any definition should encompass the belief that it should not serve as a replacement of an administrator's role. They also reiterated Wasley's¹¹ simple definition that teacher leadership is "influencing and engaging colleagues towards improved practice". Fay¹² had earlier defined a teacher leader as:

a practicing teacher, chosen by fellow faculty members to lead them in ways determined by the context of individual school needs, who has formal preparation and scheduled time for a leadership role which, to preserve the teacher mission, calls for neither managerial nor supervisory duties (p.1).

The emphasis here was again on improving teaching and not necessarily administrative duties. Patterson and Patterson¹³ added to this by stressing the either formal or informal capacity of the teacher leader and again emphasized improving classroom practice. Danielson¹⁴ extended this stating that teacher leaders "call others to action and energize them with the aim of improving teaching and learning" (p. 16). More recently, Reeves¹⁵ has brought the definition back to its roots by outlining that teacher leadership is an act of influencing the classroom practice of others. Though the above definitions have slightly different perspectives, they share the common aspect that it should be about professional educators influencing classroom practices.

Teacher leadership and student learning

While through the MET Project¹⁶ we know that good teachers help students learn more (specifically English, reading, math, and biology), teacher leadership should also provide a method in which to develop good teachers. York-Barr and Duke¹⁷ showed that school expertise becomes more widely dispersed when accomplished teachers model instructional practices, encourage sharing of best practices, mentor new teachers and collaborate with teaching colleagues, all of which epitomize teacher leadership. Since the aim of the school is to improve student learning, teacher leaders must have the instructional skills to help peers implement innovative strategies. Harrison and Killion¹⁸ stated that a teacher-leader is "an instructional specialist [that] helps colleagues implement effective teaching strategies (§ 5)". A study by Wise, Cartwright, and Bradshaw¹⁹ explained that teacher leadership leads to teacher empowerment which positively impacts student learning because empowered teachers improve upon their instructional strategies and concentrate on improving learning outcomes. Teacher leadership helps teachers understand their role as teachers and the outcome of the learning process with regard to students. In essence, teacher leadership promotes a teacher's commitment to student learning.²⁰

Extend the principal's capacity

The role of the principal, while complex and demanding, can benefit from having a cohort of teacher leaders. Pruitt²¹ found that since teacher leadership promotes collaboration, and the sharing of responsibilities, information, and knowledge amongst teachers, principals benefited in that some of their administrative duties were lessened. In a setting rich with teacher leadership, principals are able to extend their own capacity and create a more democratic community of learners.²² Though it can be challenging for some principals to share authority with teacher leaders, from the perspective of a teacher it is essential.²³ It provides further empowerment to teacher leaders and develops a culture which encourages teacher leadership.²⁴

Teacher leadership in the region

Though well-established abroad, teacher leadership is a relatively novel concept in Abu Dhabi and whether or not it is applicable or can be replicated in the UAE context remains questionable though several studies on teacher leadership have been conducted in the UAE and region. Abbas²⁵ argued that the UAE's contextual and cultural outlook cause difficulty in propagating teacher leadership since teaching is regarded as an inferior career in Arab countries and, therefore, most teachers refrain from exercising leadership. In addition, instructional strategies have been very traditional and not open to the creativity required to promote teacher leadership. In a Kuwait based study, Al-Suwaihel²⁶ noted that similar to other Arab nations, female leadership was not encouraged though significant progress had been made. However on a positive note, Al Fahad, Al Hajri, and Al Qahtani²⁷ found that

transformational leadership, one much more aligned with teacher leadership than transactional leadership, was the preferred approach of Kuwaiti principals.

Emirati and expatriate teachers

Given the high percentage of expatriate teachers in schools, it is important to consider the possible differences between this group and Emirati teachers as it pertains to teacher leadership. There are some obvious differences amongst these groups. First, expatriates lack job security because, like most expatriates in the region, they are technically migrant labor. Though they are skilled, they are employed on a contractual basis and can be released with little recourse. In contrast, Emiratis enjoy a high level of job security and employment protection through labor law.²⁸ This difference may influence teachers' expectations toward serving as a leader. Second, there are cultural differences that would have an impact on the perceptions of teacher leadership. In analyzing cultural difference, Hofstede²⁹ conducted the seminal work into the construct of cultural distance which is defined as the degree to which cultures differ on a scale of four dimensions. These dimensions are *Power- Distance*, *Individual-Collectivist*, *Masculine- Feminine*, and *Uncertainty Avoidance*. Emirati culture is a very collectivist society, but it also maintains a high degree of *Power- Distance*. The impact of this on teacher leadership is that an in-group may be very open to peer support and learning, but also remain wary and deferential to a colleague in a position of authority such as a principal or head teacher. Expatriates who may not share these same cultural characteristics, might be less deferential to an administrator, but less willing to collaborate with peers. Both of these two major differences may emerge as key variables in the analysis of this study.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study attempted to answer the three specific research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of, and understandings about, teacher leadership in Abu Dhabi schools?
2. Are there differences in understanding of teacher leadership between Emirati and non-Emirati teachers?
3. What strategies should be implemented to promote more effective teacher leadership?

METHODOLOGY

This research utilized a quantitative method based around descriptive statistics in order to explore teacher perceptions about teacher leadership. Descriptive quantitative research involves creating careful descriptions of the phenomena under study, with the desire to determine "what is".³⁰ It can serve as the first step in the exploration of a construct in a new setting. Specifically, this study is seeking to answer the research questions surrounding general perceptions of teacher leadership and to explore differences in understanding between expatriate and Emirati teachers. Though purely quantitative, the potential exists to later expand this research to a more robust population and sample size maintaining a quantitative methodology, or to transition into a sequential explanatory mixed method study where findings from the initial quantitative phase are used to develop interview questions for the second qualitative phase.³¹

Participants

Teachers from a representative public all-girls primary school in Abu Dhabi were invited to participate in this study, and nearly the entire faculty, along with the school principal and two faculty heads agreed to this 39/45(87%). Given the current English-medium mathematics and science instruction within Abu Dhabi primary schools and the difficulty in recruiting and retaining Emiratis into the teaching profession, of the 39 participants 20 (51%) were UAE Nationals and 19 (49%) were a mix of Arab and Western expatriates. Twenty-nine (74%) of all the teachers had a bachelor's degree qualifications, while 9/39 (23%) had a post-graduate degree.

Data collection

Data was collected through the implementation of a closed response survey which examined the knowledge and promotion of teacher leadership in the selected Abu Dhabi school (see Appendix). The demographics of the teaching faculty meant that both Arabic or English versions of the instrument were available to participants. Key questions asked participants about awareness of teacher leadership,

understanding of teacher leadership roles, importance of teacher leadership, beliefs about whether or not teacher leadership was practiced, and strategies to promote teacher leadership. Though all questions were ground in the literature, the question pertaining to the importance of teacher leadership was developed from specific earlier research,^{17,18,20,22} while the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality³² provided the questions about strategies for promoting teacher leadership. Given that some teachers may not have been familiar with teacher leadership, a number of explanations and definitions were provided to them in the questionnaire.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section puts forth the most impactful survey data in response to the three research questions. First, teacher awareness of teacher leadership was examined. Next, whether or not they believed it important along with the reasons for its importance were probed. The third area investigated what they believed were the roles played by teacher leaders, and then whether or not teacher leadership was applied in their school. Finally, teachers were asked to identify which strategies they felt would best promote teacher leadership in schools.

One of the first questions addressed the issue of whether or not teachers were aware of the concept of teacher leadership prior to this study. The respondents were nearly equally divided in their responses with 10 (51%) familiar and 19 (49%) unfamiliar with the concept (see Figure 1). Amongst the Emirati and expatriate faculty there were also differences in that only 8/20 (40%) of Emiratis were aware of teacher leadership, while 12/19 (63%) of expatriates were aware of the concept prior to this study. This may demonstrate some fundamental cultural differences in understanding of how and why teachers can lead.

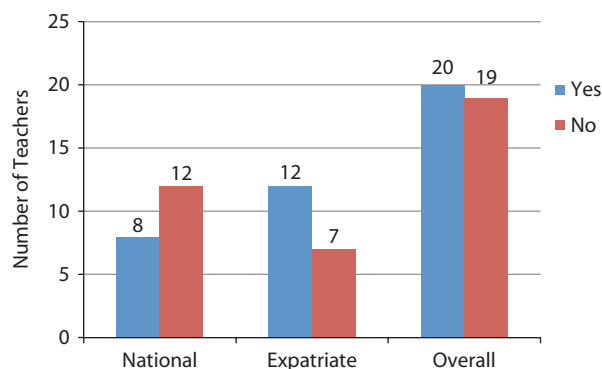


Figure 1. Familiar with theory of teacher leadership.

Given that this study had provided definitions and explanations of teacher leadership, a concept that nearly half of respondents were not acutely familiar, it was thought-provoking that teachers were nearly unanimous in their response to whether or not they believed practicing teacher leadership was important. For this, 38/39 (97%) of teachers believed it was important with only one expatriate teacher unsure. This represents overwhelming evidence that teachers believed that they should have leadership roles within schools.

The reasons as to why teacher leadership is important focused on five possibilities. As indicated in Figure 2, the two reasons most selected by participants were that it *improves teaching* 29/39 (74%) and *improves learning* 28/39 (72%). The least prominent selection was that it *extends the capacity of the principal* 14/39 (36%). The remaining options, *provides professional growth* 26/39 (67%) and *provides teaching materials* 22/39 (56%) were also well-represented. In terms of differences between Emirati and expatriate teachers, expatriates consistently made a higher number of selections than Emiratis. In only the case of *provides professional growth* with 13 selections by both Emiratis and expatriates were they equal. Overall, Emiratis made a total of 52 selections, and expatriates made 67 selections, while comprising a slightly smaller percentage of the participants. This indicates that expatriates believed that the reasons provided more accurately represented why teacher leadership was important and may point to the *Power-Distance*²⁹ divide between expatriates and Emiratis. Expatriates being more willing to act without consent of school leadership. It does not, however, evince

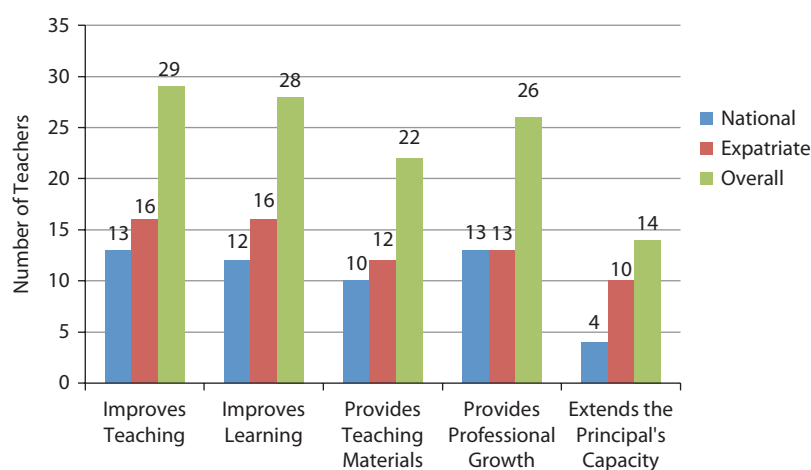


Figure 2. Reasons teacher leadership is important.

that expatriates felt teacher leadership more important because, as had previously been shown, 38/39 (97%) of teachers believed teacher leadership was important.

Though the survey presented definitions and descriptions of teacher leadership which dealt with roles, common roles of *coordinator*, *professional developer*, *administrative duties*, *curriculum developer*, and *mentor* were queried in the survey. Unexpectedly, *curriculum developer* and *mentor* were not selected as roles of teacher leaders in their school. This may be attributed to the fact that the Abu Dhabi curriculum is quite structured and the heads of faculty are expected to formally mentor teachers. This may also help explain why Dickson, Riddlebarger, Stringer, Tennant, and Kennetz³³ found that novice Emirati teachers perceived lack of support from colleagues. Figure 3 revealed that from the three roles selected, *administrative duties* was by far the most selected role with 34/39 (87%) selections. *Coordinator* and *professional developer* were quite similar with 21/39 (54%) and 22/39 (56%) selections respectively. The one role in which Emiratis and expatriates varied greatly was in *professional developer* since only 6/19 (32%) of expatriates nominated it as a role, but fully 16/20 (80%) of Emiratis made the selection. Further research into role expectations will be required to understand this difference.

In terms of whether or not teachers believed the teacher leader role applied in their school, again there was overwhelming consensus that it did. Overall, 34/39 (87%) believed it did, while only 5/39 (13%) did not believe or did not know if it applied. Of these 5, 4 were Emiratis, so they were slightly more negative or unsure than the expatriate teachers.

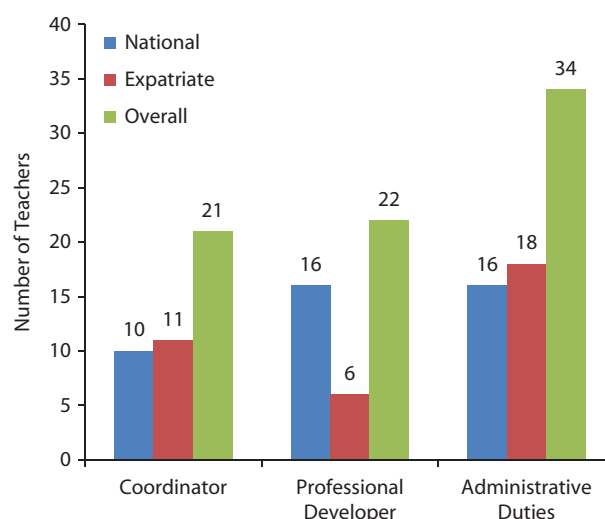


Figure 3. Roles of teacher leaders.

The final area investigated was the strategies to promote teacher leadership. Teachers were asked to review a list of strategies taken from the National Comprehensive Centre for Teacher Quality³², and select all of the ones they felt would be useful and applicable in their setting. Table 1 presents the findings in descending order from the overall most selected to least selected. Two thirds or more of the teachers selected *Recognize the Importance of Teacher Leaders*, *Establish Professional Development Programs*, *Identify Barriers*, and *Build Professional Learning Communities*, as the most efficacious, while *Enhance the Professionalism of Teaching and Teachers*, *Promote Union Support of Teachers as Leaders*, and *Distribute Leadership Tasks* were identified by less than 20% of the participants. There were substantial differences between Emirati and expatriate teachers for the two most commonly selected strategies as far more Emiratis made the selections. For *Recognize the Importance of Teacher Leaders*, it may be that the Emiratis realize that more awareness is needed about the teacher leader construct, and for *Establish Professional Development Programs* it may be that they see professional development as the avenue to achieve this. In a similar vein, Emiratis were also stronger proponents of *Improve Development Programs*, which points to their belief there is a need to increase the effectiveness of existing professional development. Though it only had an overall selection of 21/39 (54%), expatriates chose *Encourage Positive Faculty Relationships* at a much higher rate than Emiratis. This probably points to the expatriate experience of teaching in Emirati public schools- they technically are, and always will be, outsiders unless steps are taken to make them feel welcome. Though no Emiratis selected any of the final three strategies, and only expatriates did, their limited percentage makes them of little consequence. The key strategies that teachers feel should be employed are quite clear, but minor modifications may need to be considered when targeting the two different groups of teachers.

Table 1. Strategies to promote teacher leadership.

Strategies	National	Expatriate	Overall
Recognize the Importance of Teacher Leaders	16 (80%)	11 (58%)	27 (69%)
Establish Professional Development Programs	16 (80%)	11 (58%)	27 (69%)
Identify Barriers	13 (65%)	13 (68%)	26 (67%)
Build Professional Learning Communities	14 (70%)	12 (63%)	26 (67%)
Support Teacher Leaders	13 (65%)	12 (63%)	25 (64%)
Improve Development Programs	16 (80%)	8 (42%)	24 (63%)
Encourage the Development of Teacher Leaders	12 (60%)	11 (58%)	23 (59%)
Encourage Positive Faculty Relationships	8 (40%)	13 (68%)	21 (54%)
Include Information About Teacher Leaders	12 (60%)	10 (53%)	21 (54%)
Recognize Teacher Leaders	9 (45%)	9 (21%)	18 (46%)
Promote Principal Support	9 (45%)	8 (42%)	17 (44%)
Recruit Qualified and Effective Teacher Leaders	6 (30%)	8 (42%)	14 (35%)
Enhance the Professionalism of Teaching and Teachers	0	7 (37%)	7 (18%)
Promote Union Support of Teachers as Leaders	0	7 (37%)	7 (18%)
Distribute Leadership Tasks	0	6 (32%)	6 (15%)

CONCLUSIONS

The findings from this study clearly indicate that teacher leadership is a concept that resonates with Abu Dhabi primary school teachers, both Emirati and expatriate alike although in different ways. Though teacher leadership may not have been a concept many teachers were familiar with prior to this study, responses to the research questions indicated they understood it in practice and considered it extremely important, important because they believed it can improve teaching and learning.

The focus on teaching and learning manifested itself when *professional developer* was identified by an overwhelming number of Emiratis as an important teacher leadership role. This may point to the collectivist nature of Emirati culture,²⁹ while the limited selection from expatriates may demonstrate that they have limited expectations for teacher leadership within the UAE. In a similar manner, when *Establish Professional Development Programs* was selected as joint lead for strategies to promote teacher leadership, the disparity between the Emirati and expatriate teacher again emerged. These differences in perception will need to be a consideration in any attempt to foster teacher leadership through professional development. In order for such peer driven activities to succeed for both Emiratis and expatriates, a warm and welcoming school culture will need to be in place. A sense of belonging will be a precursor to bringing the expatriates to the level of comfort of the Emirati.

Well aligned with Patterson and Patterson's¹³ definition of a teacher leader, overall these findings indicate that Abu Dhabi has a cohort of teachers who want to offer, and participate in, professional development centered on becoming better teachers able to positively impact student learning. However, the teacher leader is currently most commonly associated with someone engaged in administrative duties, so to transform this perception, professional development structures and programs must be developed to enable teacher leaders, both Emirati and expatriate, to lead professional development and for emerging leaders to participate in it. By doing this, the teacher leader can work with others towards improving classroom practices and enhancing school reform. It is this lesson which extends the contribution of this study to beyond Abu Dhabi. School reform is only a success if teachers feel they own and are engaged in the process.³⁴

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APPENDIX

Teacher Leadership Survey

Acknowledging the theory of teacher leadership

Below are some definitions of teacher leadership theory. Please read and answer the following questions.

Fay¹² defined a teacher leader as “a practicing teacher, chosen by fellow faculty members to lead them in ways determined by the context of individual school needs, who has formal preparation and scheduled time for a leadership role which, to preserve the teacher mission, calls for neither managerial nor supervisory duties” (p.1).

Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson & Hann (2002) argued that “teacher leadership facilitates principled action to achieve whole-school success. It applies the distinctive power of teaching to shape meaning for children, youth, and adults. It also contributes to long-term, enhanced quality of community life” (p.10).

Patterson and Patterson¹³ defined a teacher leader as “someone who works with colleagues for the purpose of improving teaching and learning, whether in a formal or informal capacity” (p.74).

1. Are you familiar with teacher leadership theory?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
2. Do you think practicing the teacher leadership role is crucial?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
 - ☐ I don't know
3. If you believe that teacher leadership practice is important identify reasons below:
 - ☐ Improves teaching quality
 - ☐ Improves student's learning
 - ☐ Supports school system (provide teaching materials in the school)
 - ☐ Provides professional growth
 - ☐ Extends the capacity of the principal
4. How do you define the teacher leader?
 - ☐ Coordinator
 - ☐ Preparing Professional Development for teachers
 - ☐ Support school system (administrative duties)
 - ☐ Curriculum development
 - ☐ Mentoring and coaching other teachers
 - ☐ Other
5. Does the teacher leader role apply in the school?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
 - ☐ I don't know
6. Researchers³² have identified the following strategies to promote teacher leadership theories in schools, please select the ones that you think would be useful and applicable. You may choose as many as you wish.
 - ☐ Recognize the importance of teacher leaders
 - ☐ Establish professional development programs
 - ☐ Identify barriers
 - ☐ Improve development programs
 - ☐ Build professional learning communities
 - ☐ Support teacher leaders
 - ☐ Promote principal support

- Encourage the development of teacher leaders
- Encourage positive faculty relationships
- Recognize teacher leaders
- Recruit qualified and effective teacher leaders
- Include information about teacher leaders
- Enhance the professionalism of teaching and teachers
- Promote union support of teachers as leaders
- Distribute leadership tasks

*Note- survey contains only questions utilized in this study.