Special Issue Article

Transforming Identities: The Transition From Teacher to Leader During Teacher Leader Preparation

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Abstract

Since 1997, the Great Lakes Academy has provided leadership development for more than 800 teachers in a large metropolitan region of the Upper Midwest. Graduates of the 2-year program often describe their experience as transformative, life changing, and profound. To understand the meaning and impact of this transformation, the author used Mezirow's theory of transformative learning as a lens for analyzing the written reflections of recent graduates and interviews with teachers who completed the program 2 years earlier. Study findings highlight the importance of identity transformation as a critical step in the preparation of teacher leaders.

As the practice of teacher leadership grows in our nation's schools, so also must our understanding of how to prepare teachers for these critical leadership roles and responsibilities. The current literature is largely silent on the features, aims, and outcomes associated with different approaches to teacher leadership preparation (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). This lack of clarity leaves developers of teacher leadership programs with little guidance as they strive to create formal learning experiences that realize teacher leadership as a resource for school improvement and reform (Berg, Carver, & Mangin, 2014). To fill this void, this study sought to understand the nature of

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participant learning within an existing teacher leadership development program that is highly regarded by both participants and their supporting districts.

Graduates of the Great Lakes Teacher Leadership Academy[1] (Academy) routinely describe their intensive 2-year preparation as *transformative, life changing, impactful*, and *profound*. Founded by a group of superintendents, the Academy was created to support the development of teacher leaders who could help their schools successfully implement new mandates for instructional reform. Fifteen years later, program graduates remain vocal in their praise, describing the program as personally and professionally transformative. As a result of their Academy experience, graduates consistently report changed understandings about themselves as teachers and leaders and about their work with colleagues.

To understand the nature of this transformation, particularly its meaning and impact, I analyzed the written reflections of recent program graduates, interviewed a select sample of graduates from an earlier cohort, reviewed program documents, and talked with program founders. What I found surprised me. Although teachers in the program were selected for their promise as leaders and often came with considerable leadership experience, not all entered the program with a leadership identity. Committed to the classroom, many eschewed labels that assumed traditional lines of power and authority. Through their participation in the Academy, however, these teachers began to realize that they could retain their commitment to the classroom while still exercising influence with their colleagues. Using Mezirow's (2000) theory of transformative learning as a lens for interpreting study results, I explain participants' paradigmatic shift in perspective as key to their transition from teacher to teacher leader. In sum, study findings highlight the importance of identity transformation as a critical component in the preparation of teacher leaders.

Teacher Leadership Development

For many teacher leaders, learning to lead occurs on the job through experience. As opportunities for teacher leadership roles and responsibilities expand, however, so will the demand for a range of programs that prepare and support teacher leaders. These programs are likely to vary by length, purpose, impact, and outcomes. For example, professional organizations may develop specialized professional development seminars, local districts and schools may facilitate the organization of in-house teacher leader networks, and universities may create certificate- and degree-based programs. Each of these offerings holds promise for helping to meet the growing need for well-prepared teacher leaders, yet little is currently known about how these various programs work to support teacher leadership learning and development. As scholars note, there remains a dearth of research on preparation programming and its impact on teachers and schools (Gallucci, Van Lare, Yoon, & Boatright, 2010; Ross et al., 2011; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

To illustrate, one can find research-based descriptions of teacher leadership programs (Berg, Bosch, & Souvanna, 2013; Henning, Trent, Engelbrecht, Robinson, & Reed, 2004; Valli, van Zee, & Rennert-Ariev, 2006), yet this literature is so program

specific that cross-site comparisons are difficult. Similarly, there is a growing body of resources to support teacher leadership preparation programming, from case studies (Stoelinga & Mangin, 2010; Swanson, Elliott, & Harmon, 2011) to standards (Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, 2011), yet little is known about how best to use these materials or the outcomes that might result from their use.

As leadership opportunities for teachers increase, we are likely to see greater demand for teachers who are ready and prepared to fill new and increasingly complex roles and responsibilities. Research that examines the affordances and constraints of various approaches to teacher leadership preparation can help to fill this gap, as can research that seeks to understand the nature of teacher leadership development within these contrasting programs and approaches. An important component of that development concerns leadership identity formation.

Teacher Leadership and Identity Formation

It is widely acknowledged that teacher leaders, both formal and informal, are well positioned to lead their colleagues in curricular and instructional reforms (Barth, 2002; Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Mangin & Stoelinga, 2008; Murphy, 2005). With their close connection to the classroom, teacher leaders have natural credibility with their peers. As experienced educators, they understand the rigors and demands of teaching as well as the press for continuous improvement. But this transition from teacher to teacher leader can be wrought with personal and organizational challenges that lead to surprise, confusion, and even guilt as teachers let go of earlier role conceptions (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003).

When teachers move into teacher leadership roles, they often run up against organizational norms that privilege egalitarianism, privacy, autonomy, and compliance (Johnson & Donaldson, 2007 Little, 1982; Lortie, 1975; Talbert, 2010). In their efforts to act as leaders and influence change, teacher leaders report encountering resistance and isolation from their peers and even administrative leaders when they question the status quo, challenge existing practices, and assume authority beyond their classroom responsibilities (Carver & Meier, 2013; Clemson-Ingram & Fessler, 1997; Smylie & Denny, 1990; Wasley, 1991). Compounding the problem, leadership skills designed to counter traditional norms and cultures are rarely addressed in preservice or professional development programs (Bond, 2011).

Equally confounding, teacher leaders report internal conflict as their role expands beyond the classroom, and thus, many teachers are reluctant to identify as leaders (Angelle & DeHart, 2011; Berry, Byrd, & Wieder, 2013; Collay, 2011; Little, 1995; Mangin & Dunsmore, 2013). The literature suggests that overcoming this resistance to identity transformation takes time and support. In an analysis of written vignettes by teacher leaders in the National Writing Project, Lieberman and Friedrich (2010) found the majority of study participants resisted the label of teacher leaders because their understanding of leadership was grounded in a formal and hierarchical view of leaders' work. It was not until these teachers had acquired greater expertise and practiced their new leadership skills over time that role transformation occurred. In a study of

mathematics coaches and their transition from teacher to instructional coach, Chval and colleagues (2010) characterized this transition as a building process whereby teachers gradually add additional roles and images to their professional identity.

To date, much of the literature on teacher leadership points to the importance of reculturing schools, largely through supportive leadership and enhanced professional culture, as the key to growing teacher leadership (Lieberman, 1988; Margolis & Huggins, 2012; Muijs & Harris, 2003, 2007; Smylie & Denny, 1990). Yet, as I argue here, to overcome external and organizational obstacles to leadership, teachers may need to first perceive themselves as leaders capable of enacting change within and beyond their own classroom. Often introverts who need to be coaxed into leadership roles, teachers have been described as noiseless leaders who get things done, but with little attention or fanfare (Berry et al., 2013). As Collay (2011) explained, leadership does not come easily to many teachers.

> Professional socialization into formal or positional leadership presents a conundrum. The intertwined threads of the teacher-self contain skills of management, a philosophy of teaching and learning, and the ability to inspire others. But embracing formal roles of leadership can cause the threads to become tangled and knotty . . . Most of us come to know ourselves as capable, smart teachers who can lead only when we recognize the work we do as leading. (p. 66)

Collay continues by arguing that teachers need help recognizing that their work in the classroom is a genuine form of leadership.

Collectively, these accounts suggest that teachers may need more than a supportive context if they are to flourish as leaders. They may need an invitation to lead. They may need coaching to realize their work is a form of leadership. They may also need assistance in traversing through the required role-identity transformation (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003). To explain the nature of this shift in perspective from teacher to teacher leader, I now turn to transformative learning theory.

Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning theory suggests that deep and autonomous learning in adults is prompted by a shift in perspective or frame of reference. Mezirow (2000) described this perspective transformation as

> the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings. (p. 167)

Perspective transformation or reframing can occur suddenly, often as the result of an activating event, or it may occur through "an incremental process in which we gradually change bits of how we see things, not even realizing a transformation has taken

Table 1. Mezirow's (2000) Phases of Meaning.

Phases of meaning in transformative learning
• Identifying and examining dilemma or critical incident (e.g., change in job or life circumstances)
• Examining one's feelings (e.g., fear, anger)
• Conducting critical assessment of one's assumptions
• Recognizing that one's discontent and process of transformation are shared
• Exploring options for new roles, relationships, and actions
• Planning a course of action
• Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
• Provisional trying of new roles
• Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
• Reintegrating into one's life based on conditions dictated by one's new perspective

place until afterward" (Cranton, 2002, p. 65). Whether sudden or incremental, perspective transformation leads to fundamental changes in one's self-understanding, beliefs, and action. This learning about oneself is considered transformational because it changes how we understand and interact with the world around us.

Transformative learning distinguishes itself from other forms of learning when the adult learner "reinterprets an old experience (or a new one) from a new set of expectations, thus giving a new meaning and perspective to an old experience" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 11). A paradigmatic shift in perspective often starts with a disorienting dilemma or activating event. In an attempt to make sense of the experience, the adult learner initiates a process of internal questioning and self-reflection, which in turn prompts a critical examination of assumptions and beliefs. As understood by transformative learning theorists, it is not enough to layer new understandings on top of old. Rather, before new learning can occur, one needs to first uncover and then assess one's often hidden assumptions of the world and how it works (McGonigal, 2005). This process of uncovering, however, can lead to feelings of alienation and discomfort. It is in this sense of disequilibrium that learners begin to share and explore their discomfort and unease with others. As outlined by Mezirow (2000), transformative learning theory captures the various phases of meaning making considered unique to the adult learner (see Table 1).

Over time, through dialogue, adult learners are able to explore diverse viewpoints and new options for thinking and behaving, which lead to expanded knowledge and skills. With continued support from a community of peers, the learner gains confidence through the process of adopting and experimenting with new ideas, perspectives, and roles. Ultimately, change results when these new understandings and perspectives lead to action. In sum, activating events prompt perspective transformation, which lead to transformed beliefs and actions.

In formal learning environments and programs where transformative learning thrives, adult learners feel supported as they engage in critical reflection and collaborative dialogue (Hayes, 2001). Through activities such as journal writing, structured

reading and discussion, case studies and problem solving, adult learners have opportunities to articulate and reflect critically on their experiences, assumptions, and values, which in turn helps them explore new ways of acting and being (Cranton, 2002).

For participating teachers, the Great Lakes Academy offered a structured professional learning program that encouraged the critical exploration of beliefs, roles, and practices associated with teacher leadership. Through the combination of reading, discussion, action research, homework tasks, and reflective writing, participants were provided with opportunities to examine their fears and assumptions regarding teacher leadership, develop leadership skills, and practice assuming leadership roles. Given this alignment of the Academy's structure and activities with features of a learning program that supports perspective transformation, Mezirow's (2000) phases of meaning were seen as a useful lens for examining graduates' self-reports of personal and professional transformation.

Great Lakes Academy: Developing Teacher Leaders

Launched in 1997, the Academy is a 2-year multi-district seminar series designed to develop teacher leaders who are committed to high levels of learning for all children. Sponsored by the Great Lakes Teacher Leadership Consortium—an integrated network of 25 public school districts, three regional service agencies, and three community colleges in a large metropolitan area—the program reports having trained and supported more than 800 teacher leaders. From its inception, the group's founders began questioning traditional role-dominant views of school leadership, preferring instead a definition of teacher leadership that viewed all teachers as capable of influencing and leading change among their peers (Childs, 2005). As one of the consortium's founding members recalls, "We knew we had to do something to get better. We had tried every other strategy. So we turned to harnessing the power of teachers. Maybe they had the answers we were seeking."

Over the past 15 years, the core structure and content of the Academy has remained relatively unchanged. By design, districts select a team of four teachers to participate in a series of mini-retreats that constitute the 2-year program. These mini-retreats take a variety of forms, from multi-day gatherings over the summer to single-day seminars during the school year. A new cohort of teacher leaders starts every 2 years. In districts where the Academy has had a long-term presence, the selection process has become quite competitive with participant selection often guided by district reform goals and priorities.

The curriculum for the Academy is anchored by four key questions: Who am I? Where am I? How do I lead? What can I do? (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001). The Academy addresses the aforementioned questions by studying exemplary classroom practices through book studies and speakers, as well as completing a classroom action research project during the first year of the program. In addition to expanding teacher leaders' knowledge base as expert teachers, time is also devoted to helping participants develop their facilitative skills as leaders of change. To practice those new skills participants are assigned homework tasks, such as leading a professional learning discussion with one's teaching peers. Additional time is devoted to teachers' personal

development. For example, participants are introduced to Covey's (2004) *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* in their first mini-retreat.

It is common to hear Academy alumni define teacher leadership as the art of "leading from where you stand," a non-positional perspective that reflects the views of the program director who believes that teacher leadership is about exerting influence based on credibility and trustworthiness, not power or authority. To establish credibility, the program begins with an implicit understanding that teacher leaders must first be exemplary classroom teachers. By the second year of the program, participants are expected to focus on exerting influence at an organizational level through teacher leader roles that may be formal (e.g., full-time instructional coach) but are just as likely to be informal (e.g., meeting facilitator, new teacher mentor).

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to understand participants' self-reported transition from teacher to teacher leader and its implications for teacher leadership preparation and development. As a researcher with interests in teacher leadership (and also the coordinator of a university-based teacher leadership preparation program), I was curious about this program that I had heard so much about. I especially wondered about the program features that contributed to participants' overwhelmingly positive view of their Academy experience. Two research questions guided this study:

> **Research Question 1:** What is the nature of participants' reported transformation from teacher to leader?
> **Research Question 2:** What role did participating in the Academy play in that transformation?

Data collection for the study took place in two phases. First, the final written reflections of a recent cohort of program graduates were collected and analyzed for emergent patterns and themes (Boyatzis, 1998). To probe those themes, a smaller sample of graduates was then interviewed using techniques of responsive interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Data analysis was informed by a constructivist/interpretive paradigm (Creswell, 2003), which openly acknowledges the social construction of meaning by researcher and participant.

Study Participants

Study participants consisted of 89 teachers who graduated from the Academy in 2013, as well as a smaller sample of 12 teachers drawn from the cohort that graduated in 2011, 2 years earlier. To identify that smaller sample, four districts (among the 25 participating) were identified as being representative of the consortium's total membership, namely suburban districts with increasingly diverse low- to upper-middle-class populations. In narrowing the sample to graduates from these four districts, my aim was to understand participants' shared experience within a smaller number of

local contexts. In all, 12 teachers (all female) from the 2011 cohort volunteered to participate in a series of two in-depth interviews. One declined due to time restraints and another did not respond to the invitation.

At the time of the interviews, roughly 2 years after program completion, two of the participants had been promoted within their districts to principal positions, and three served in roles where they split their time between classroom teaching and formal teacher leadership roles (e.g., assessment coordinator, literacy coach). The other seven interviewees were full-time teachers who held a wide range of leadership roles that did not require leaving the classroom (e.g., department chair, grade-level coordinator, new teacher mentor, school-improvement chair). All 12 had at least 11 years of classroom teaching experience. As illustrated in Table 2, participants described their Academy experience in terms that highlighted the transformative nature of their learning (e.g., life changing, significant). To protect the identities of the study participants and their district, pseudonyms are used.

Data Collection and Analysis

To identify themes and patterns of transformation through Academy participation, I used two forms of self-reported data: written reflections and individual interviews. As summarized below, these data were collected and analyzed in two phases. To supplement study data, I conducted informal interviews with two program founders and reviewed program artifacts (e.g., Academy brochure and application form, advisory board minutes).

Phase I: Written reflections. Upon program completion, Academy graduates were asked by the program director to reflect in writing about their 2-year experience. These reflections ranged from two to seven pages in length. As a result, nearly 300 pages of written text were collected. Participants were asked to address four writing prompts.

1. Describe three things you do differently as a result of program participation.
2. Describe your district's return on investment. In what ways do you expect this return to be visible to the school community?
3. Define what it means to be a teacher leader in the 21st century.
4. What are your plans for continuing your learning and leadership journey?

The written reflections were first read independently by myself and a graduate assistant, then collaboratively to identify themes and patterns (Boyatzis, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). During a third reading, reflections were assigned descriptive codes based on identified themes (Saldana, 2009). These themes included (a) personal definitions of teacher leadership, (b) reflections on the Academy experience, and (c) reports of personal and professional transformation and impact. It was in the coding process and subsequent analysis that the potential role of identity formation in participants' "life changing" transformation from teacher to teacher leader surfaced. This observation helped to shape the study's next stage, participant interviews.

Table 2. Sub-Sample of Study Participants.

District	Participant	Work location	Current role	Three words about academy
Pine Glen	Diane Kooper	High school	Mathematics teacher and department chair	Challenging Rejuvenating Uncomfortable
	Mary Beth Keach	High school	Principal	Empowering Life changing Transformational
	Sue Keller	Elementary school	Principal	Exhilarating Significant Thought-provoking
Lewiston	Brooke Miller	Elementary school	Grade 1 teacher	Amazing Confidence Life changing
	Kelly Carter	Elementary school	Grade 4 teacher	Confidence boosting Life changing Ongoing
	Nicole Allen	High school	Mathematics teacher and curriculum coordinator	Engaging Life changing Significant
Lone Wind	April Meakes	Elementary school	Grade 3 teacher	Exciting Growth Meaningful
	Cathy Adams	Elementary school	Grade 3 teacher	Exciting Growth Learning
Wayne	Angela Thomas	Elementary school	Elementary special education teacher	Healthy Life changing Meaningful
	Ann Sadler	Middle school	Grade 6 English Language Learner teacher	Enthusiastic Enveloping Exciting
	Cheryl Cameron	Elementary school	Grade 4 teacher and literacy coach	Instruction Networking Systems thinking
	Nancy Harris	Elementary school	Grade 4 teacher and literacy coach	Authentic/purposeful Connections Engaging

Phase II: Participant interviews. Interviews were seen as an ideal strategy for eliciting from a smaller group of participants a range of perspectives that could be compared, contrasted, and mapped by themes and patterns. As a data collection strategy, in-depth qualitative

interviewing enables the researcher to draw meaning from another's perspective (Patton, 1990). The research design included two individual interviews with each graduate. These interviews were designed to (a) gather participant's lived and recalled experiences during the 2-year program and (b) clarify participant's reflections and recollections through follow-up questioning. To reduce the tendency toward inflated self-report, the interviews were conducted 2 years after program completion so that participants might reflect more critically and objectively on their Academy experience. Examples of questions posed during the interviews included the following: How do you define teacher leadership? In what ways are you acting as a teacher leader in your building? Of all that you learned or gained through the Academy, what was most useful or relevant? Looking back on your career, at what point did you think of yourself as a teacher leader?

As with the written reflections, the interview transcriptions were first read independently and then collaboratively to identify themes and establish a coding system that allowed for finer grained analysis (e.g., leadership challenges were categorized into reported difficulties with administrators, with colleagues, and with personal doubts). Similarly, definitions of teacher leadership were categorized by understandings of teacher leadership, personal identification as teacher leaders, and rewards of teacher leadership. Remaining codes included teacher leadership knowledge and skill development, personal and professional impact of the Academy experience, district context, and career aspirations. Once codes were agreed upon by reviewers, the remaining transcripts were coded using N-Vivo, a qualitative data management software. Later stage analysis focused on comparing and contrasting established patterns and themes (e.g., definitions of teacher leadership with leadership challenges), seeking disconfirming evidence (e.g., consistency in definitions of teacher leadership), and proposing alternate explanations across the corpus of data sources (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

Study Findings

To understand how participation in the Academy supported teachers' self-reported transformation as leaders, I drew on Mezirow's (2000) theory of transformative learning first to identify the ways in which participants' perspectives shifted over time, then to trace those shifts back to the Academy program. I begin this section by looking at participants' changed perspective, namely, a new openness to being a resource for other teachers, an eagerness to define teacher leadership on their own terms, and a readiness to embrace a leadership identity. I then offer three Academy-based explanations for these changed perspectives: increased knowledge and skills that led to greater confidence, the development of an inquiry orientation that prepared participants to lead and learn alongside their colleagues, and identification with a group of like-minded peers that was both affirming and empowering.

Perspective Transformation: Thinking Beyond the Classroom

Study participants were unanimous in their praise for the Academy. When asked in the first interview for three words that best characterized their experience, the two most

commonly mentioned terms were "life changing" (also "transformative") and "exciting" (also "exhilarating" and "amazing"). Asked to elaborate, participants related stories of how the Academy experience positively influenced their commitment to the teaching profession and their understanding of a teacher leaders' impact. Without prompting, many participants also spoke about how these changes extended into their personal lives, whether it was how they led their daughter's Girl Scout troop or how they set personal goals. As Kelly shared, "I think of my experiences in [the Academy] as being something that affected me in a very positive way, something that affected me through my entire being, my entire life, not just my school career." For Kelly and others, what they learned about themselves as teachers and leaders had application at work, at home with their families, and in their communities.

What explains teachers' life-changing experience from participating in the Academy? Transformative learning theory suggests that high-impact learning by adults is prompted by perspective transformation, which can be either dramatic and sudden or gradual in nature. As Mezirow (2000) argued, it is through the reframing of assumptions and beliefs that learning occurs. Data analysis revealed three ways in which participants' original assumptions were challenged through Academy participation.

Becoming a resource for teachers. Through Academy participation, teachers engaged in professional reading on instructional reform, reflective discussion, and skill building relative to facilitating effective meetings, leading professional development, and supporting colleagues in the change process. For example, in an early homework task, participants were asked to lead a meeting with colleagues. Over time, homework tasks became more complex, for example, plan, lead, and evaluate your colleagues in a professional learning experience. Through this acquisition of new knowledge and skills, participants reported greater awareness of leadership needs and opportunities *outside* of the classroom. Diane shared, "It opened up a door that I didn't know about, and it made me realize that 'Wow,' this [leadership] is for me. This is where I could go. It got me thinking outside of my classroom."

In particular, study participants described a growing sense of power and agency from realizing their leadership potential outside of the classroom. Ann explained how participating in the Academy gave her confidence to ask questions of her colleagues and share tools for helping them to learn, grow, and change. Angela reported, "I'm not just a resource for the students. I'm a resource for the teachers as well." As confirmation, she added, "My voice is in so many pockets of this building . . . I think it has made me braver. I speak up more." Mary Beth shared a powerful expression of this transformation when she realized that being a teacher leader required her not only to think differently, but also to act differently.

> I think it happens in the moment, [such as] when [the project director said] . . . "Enough already. You are a good teacher. It's not enough. Who cares? So what? You are all good teachers. But now you are responsible for the teacher down the hall . . . She is your responsibility. It's not enough anymore to get in [your classroom] and shut the door. They

are all part of your classroom." . . . Once you understand that, once you buy into that, once you believe that, that's when you become a teacher leader.

For Mary Beth and others, participating in the Academy introduced an understanding of teacher leadership that embraced responsibility for not only one's students but also one's colleagues. For Mary Beth, this expanded conception was triggered in a moment by the program director's comments; for others, it was a more gradual shift in mind-set. Cutting across personal and professional domains, participants' openness to being a resource for their colleagues served as an illustration of perspective transformation.

(Re)defining teacher leadership. More than half of study participants started the program with a traditional view of leadership that privileged authority and positionality. For these individuals, school leaders were principals and central office administrators. This view was repeatedly challenged, however, through discussion and self-reflection. During the 2-year program, participants were encouraged to examine their mind-sets about school leadership and also to articulate their assumptions about the teaching profession. Promoting a servant leadership perspective (Greenleaf, 2003), the program's motto was to lead from where you stand. Over time, Academy participants came to understand that teacher leadership did not require a choice: teaching or leading. Instead, teacher leadership represented a new style of school leadership embedded in their identity as expert teachers. As one interviewee shared, "just because you don't have the title, or a title, doesn't make you less of a leader."

The interview data further revealed that, when asked to share their understanding of teacher leadership, participants were significantly more likely to describe a set of dispositional traits and behaviors than a formalized set of roles and responsibilities. The traits or characteristics of teacher leadership referenced by participants fell into four primary categories: (a) openness to risk-taking, (b) commitment to lifelong learning, (c) willingness to be a team player, and (d) passion for making a difference. To illustrate, participants described teacher leaders as those who willingly step outside of their comfort zone to work with colleagues and to advocate for change. These individuals are risk-takers: They show initiative and are not afraid to try new things. Participants described teacher leaders as committed to their own learning and possessing an inquiry mind-set. As reflective practitioners, they are instructional experts who stay abreast of current trends and research-proven practices. Participants also saw teacher leaders as team players, role models, and coaches who build trustworthy relationships through effective communication skills. Finally, participants defined teacher leaders as exuding passion, enthusiasm, and positivity. Rather than fear change, teacher leaders embraced the opportunity to impact change.

Viewed collectively, the above traits support a conceptualization of teacher leadership that is neither positional nor role bound, but can be practiced by any teacher, at any time, and in any place—including the classroom. Study participants reported finding this non-positional view of teacher leadership liberating as it allowed them to maintain their identity as a teacher while preparing to be leaders.

Embracing a leadership identity. Although teachers were selected for participation because they had demonstrated leadership potential, only one participant entered the program strongly identifying as a leader. For six of the 12 interviewed, it was not until they participated in the Academy that they began to perceive themselves as leaders who could make a difference and who had something important to share. As Brooke explained,

> That's what [the Academy] has done to me . . . I could have stayed in the classroom. That's the kind of person I am. I'm not like, "Hey, look at me!" . . . but it made me feel really proud of myself and I realized that, "Wow, I really do have something to offer other teachers."

Once a reluctant leader, participating in the Academy gave Brooke the confidence to stretch beyond her comfort zone and influence change outside the classroom. Similarly, Diane credited the program with helping her feel like a leader.

> I always wondered, are the leaders of this school the administrators or the department chairs? Are they the people who have titles? I always felt like I was a leader, but I didn't know how. It was because other teachers respected me, but I didn't feel like a complete leader. It was [participating in the Academy] that made me feel like the small things [that I] do are leadership.

Realizing that leadership can take many forms that do not require leaving the classroom, Diane grew increasingly confident in her ability to act as a teacher leader. As Mezirow (2000) noted, changed beliefs lead to new actions. Shortly after completing the program, Diane accepted a department chair position, a formal leadership role she had not previously imagined for herself.

The above comments suggest that Academy-based learning activities and experiences shifted participants' mind-set about who can be a leader and what leaders do to influence change. For those who did not readily identify as leaders, this shift occurred incrementally as a result of readings, discussion, authentic practice, and self-reflection over time. In essence, these experiences served to prepare or ready teachers to see themselves as leaders. Once each realized she had something valuable to offer, however, they reported finding the courage and confidence to step outside of their classroom comfort zone.

The remaining individuals in the study's sample were equally positive about their Academy experience, but the interview data suggest that they started the program with a stronger leadership identity due to prior leadership roles and experience. For these individuals, participating in the program reinforced and strengthened their leadership skills, commitments, and vision. The two recently appointed principals in the study provide helpful illustrations of this happening. Through the action research process, Sue learned how to systematically study and improve her teaching practice. In her words, the Academy "provided me with the vehicle to really improve myself," a commitment she carries forward into her practice as a school leader who encourages

teachers to actively own their own continuous learning and development. For Mary Beth, the program served as a catalyst for moving into the principalship where she could impact change on a larger scale. More specifically, the Academy helped her shape a vision for instructional change that rested on the active support of teacher leaders in her building.

Professional Transformation: Enacting a Leadership Identity

While analyzing the data, I was also interested in learning how the Academy contributed to participants' reports of transformation, especially as it pertained to leadership identity formation and development. Thus, I looked for evidence of high-impact learning that mimicked Mezirow's (2000) phases of transformative learning (e.g., activating events, opportunities for critical reflection and constructive dialogue, support for experimentation, and competence building). Analysis of both the written reflections and the interview transcriptions revealed three critical ways in which the program supported leadership identify transformation and learning.

Increasing knowledge and skills. Academy participants gained new knowledge and skill through timely readings and activities. Favorite readings included Dweck's (2006) *Mindset: The New Philosophy of Success* and Covey's (2004) *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Additional topics for study and discussion included brain-based learning, grading practices, cultural competence, and Garmston and Wellman's (2008) work on adaptive schools. Collectively, these resources and activities served to expand not only participants' understanding and vision of school and instructional reform but also their new role as a teacher leader. As one interviewee reported, the program was as rigorous as a graduate-degree program with regular readings, guided discussion, and homework assignments. And, because their learning was so relevant to this new role, others spoke candidly about how the Academy was the best professional development they had ever experienced. More than half of the group confided a sense of loss when their 2 years in the Academy ended. They especially missed being introduced to books that the program director told them "will change your life." Several added that this was the most professional reading they had ever done.

From analyzing the interviews, it became clear that scholarly readings and accompanying activities developed participants' knowledge of current educational practices and policies, which in turn grounded their instructional vision, enhanced their skills, and developed their confidence as teachers and leaders. Confidence building was transformative because it supported their willingness to step outside the safe boundaries of their classroom and take more active roles in school-wide decision making. This shift was perhaps most evident in their self-report of facilitating peer groups. Cathy shared that prior to participating in the Academy, she would be "struck with panic" over the thought of presenting to large groups; 2 years after completing the program, she feels "like you could toss just about anything in my lap that I was unfamiliar with and I could do it—even on short notice."

Although many teachers started the program with leadership experience, participating in the Academy was especially helpful in developing and expanding participants' group leadership skills. In the following excerpt, Ann explained how the Academy honed her facilitation skills.

> I had often found myself in the role of the leader, but [the Academy] helped me hone those skills . . . I knew what a meeting looked like, and how to get feedback from your meeting, and how to use that feedback for the next meeting . . . how to use movement so [attendees] are not just sitting the whole time, and ways to do team-building . . . [the Academy] gave me those tools.

Each participant in the study described learning and refining critical leadership skills through Academy participation. In turn, participating teachers attributed these new skills (e.g., planning a meeting agenda, engaging in team-building activities, using feedback to plan next steps) to increased opportunities for leadership activity and influence in their school building and district.

From a transformative learning perspective, carefully selected readings and speakers served as activating events that prompted critical introspection. Through discussion with others, participants were able to question their assumptions and explore new roles, relationships, and actions. Through homework assignments, such as leading professional learning with colleagues, participants were able to practice new leadership roles that "got in their heads" by building upon their strengths as educators. And through critical self-reflection, participants were further encouraged to "try on" both new and expanded leadership roles.

With practice and over time, study participants reported heightened confidence and self-assurance, which in turn led to action. For example, Nancy introduced and later led a leadership program for students at her elementary school, and Ann started a professional learning community (PLC) focused on content literacy in her middle school. As already shared, Diane found the courage to become a department chair.

> I would have never felt comfortable being a department chair before . . . I would have felt like . . . I didn't know enough. It's like I can always keep learning new stuff. Do I know enough to be in charge? The fact of the matter is, I don't have to know everything.

Diane's recognition that she knew enough was significant because it challenged assumptions she had about leaders having all the answers. In this case, a new perspective, enabled by increased knowledge and skill, gave her the confidence she needed to assume the role of department chair.

Developing an inquiry orientation. Interviewees spoke often about the value of planning and carrying out a classroom-based action research project. Conducting action research gave them a sense of instructional mastery and a stronger voice when advocating for educational improvements. Bolstered by data that confirmed the effectiveness of a teaching method or approach, they reported increased confidence when sharing the

findings with colleagues. They also described the importance of modeling for their peers an inquiry approach to learning and teaching, one that actively sought and tested new strategies and techniques for improving student learning. To illustrate, the action research project provided Brooke with an opportunity to test a hunch about phonics instruction and take her teaching "to the next level." Her study results later drew the respect of her principal and superintendent who advocated for district-wide changes to the phonics curriculum based on Brooke's "little idea." The opportunity to engage in action research and share her results built Brooke's sense of competence, giving her the confidence to exert influence in her school and district. Stories such as Brooke's were shared throughout the other interviews.

According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), practitioner research supports the development of inquiry as a professional stance or disposition, which is needed if teachers are to contribute to and engage in educational decision making. This shift in perspective—from being a passive knowledge user to being an active knowledge maker—was evident across the interviews, as all shared ways in which conducting action research developed their expertise and equipped them with tools for studying issues or problems of practice in their classroom and in their school. More than 2 years after completing the Academy, each study participant reported continued use of inquiry within their classrooms and schools or with their PLCs and related teacher groups.

From a transformative learning perspective, conducting action research served as an activating event that prompted participants to critically assess their assumptions, explore new options for practice, then develop and test an alternate course of action. In addition, this learning occurred in the context of a supportive community of practice. Through face-to-face meetings and online discussion groups, Academy participants worked collaboratively to identify and narrow research questions, design research plans, and discuss the meaning and implication of collected data. Because Academy participants were required to formally present their findings during the semi-annual Action Research Fair attended by alumni and consortium guests, they had an added opportunity to vet their new understandings and insights in a public forum before sharing with colleagues in their home school and district.

Identifying with like-minded community members. Finally, interviewees spoke at length about the value of collaborating with peers who felt equally passionate about teaching excellence. More than one interviewee shared that relationships built in the Academy cohort were unlike any in their home schools. When pressed to elaborate, participants shared stories of serious and engaged conversations about teaching within a like-minded community. Ann stated, "Every time I went, I was just enveloped in this blanket of a community, of people who were of like mind." April explained,

> You have this giant group of really dynamic people . . . And there was just so much interaction with each other. It was a lot of connections, discussions, and experiences that really helped to take what they gave us and see it in a more . . . realistic way. It wasn't just facts or statistics, it was "Here is what I've done, here is what I've experienced, here is what I have gone through" . . . There is something that happens when a really smart group of people get together . . . it creates a culture of learning.

These comments suggest how important the Academy network was to teachers' collective learning and transformation. Nancy described it as a "shot in the arm that came along at the right time."

Specifically, the Academy provided participating teachers with a safe community that supported their efforts to explore and adopt a leadership identity and experiment with leadership roles. For Sue, the supportive community filled a void that she always felt was missing from her teaching experience: "I couldn't always get the feedback I needed from others [at my school], but [the Academy] gave me a platform for feedback." Similarly, Cathy described the experience as a way out of the isolation that is so common in the teaching profession. She particularly enjoyed being with "a cohort of people that have the same sort of goals in mind." Mary Beth characterized it as empowering: "You support one another and you acknowledge where you are on your journey with these other people and there is empowerment. In no way are you alone."

Transformative learning theory claims that perspective transformation occurs through dialogue within community, and it is through community that individuals find support to explore their assumptions, to acknowledge areas of disorientation or discontent, and to practice new roles. Data gathered through this study point toward the importance of the Academy network because it provided an authentic learning community where participants could safely test their new identity as leaders, thereby fueling the synergy of individual and collective efforts to create a community of practice grounded in competence (Wenger, 2010). For individuals who did not readily identify as teacher leaders at the beginning of the program, this collaborative experience proved to be especially transformative and empowering. Similarly, the Academy community was an affirming counter-weight to the disequilibrium that some felt in their home schools.

Discussion

I was drawn to studying the Academy after hearing numerous anecdotal reports of the program's transformational and life-changing impact. I especially wondered what made this experience so powerful. My subsequent review of the data helped to explain the meaning behind participant self-reports and offered a fresh explanation for the significance of their personal and professional transformations. In this discussion of the data, I highlight the implication of study findings for teacher leadership preparation and development, starting with participating teachers' vision of teacher leadership.

Teacher's Vision of Teacher Leadership

During their Academy experiences, participants were challenged to reconsider what it would mean for a teacher to lead from where he or she stood. Over time, their leadership understandings grew beyond that of traditional school administration to a formal and informal enactment of leadership by and for teachers (e.g., studying one's classroom, working with colleagues to improve teaching practice, representing one's building on a

district curriculum team, mentoring new teachers, planning and delivering professional development). In describing the various leadership roles they now filled, it was clear that participants valued roles that allowed them to work with colleagues and also continue teaching full- or part-time. Emblematic of the noiseless leadership roles that many teacher leaders are drawn toward (Berry et al., 2013), the majority of teachers interviewed for this study did not aspire to leave the classroom. Rather, these teachers needed to understand and trust they were not leaving their teaching role behind, but rather expanding their identity to include leadership responsibilities beyond the classroom.

Future research is needed that identifies not only different conceptions of teacher leadership but also the relationship of these conceptions to observed behaviors. As illustrated in this study, some teachers naturally identify as leaders whereas others do not; some are naturally comfortable embracing leadership responsibilities outside the classroom whereas many are not. Is it possible that current teacher leadership policy and practice neglects to recognize a sizable group of teachers as leaders simply because they need to be encouraged to see themselves as leaders capable of influencing change? Or, is it because they need to be reassured that one's commitment to teaching will be honored? And, what about millennial teachers? Will they more readily identify as leaders early in their career? Empirical studies that begin to uncover differing beliefs among teacher leaders and the resulting implications for practice can help to open the black box that currently characterizes the research on teacher leadership. Particular attention should be paid to the role that gender, years of teaching experience, and context may play in this line of research.

Significance of Identity Transformation

This study highlights the role of identity formation and development in a teacher leadership preparation program. Using Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning as an analytical lens, I found that the Academy's 2-year program served as a series of activating events. When asked what program features they found most helpful to their learning, participants responded with different answers (e.g., action research, Covey training, a particular book). Likewise, no one activity prompted reports of dramatic or universal transformation; rather, perspective transformation and learning seemed to be incremental across the life of the program. Although the pace of transformation varied with each participant, the trajectory was always the same. Through the combination of reading and discussion, homework assignments that fostered practical application and written self-reflection, study participants grew into an expanded leadership identity as the program unfolded. Cranton (2002) asserted that "critical reflection is the means by which we work through beliefs and assumptions, assessing their validity in the light of new experiences or knowledge, considering their sources, and examining underlying premises" (p. 65). By virtue of their Academy participation, teachers had multiple and ongoing opportunities to explore critically their assumptions about teaching and about themselves as teacher leaders.

The work of leadership identity formation and development was further supported by a network of like-minded teachers committed to bringing about instructional

reform. Through ongoing conversations within this community of practice, participants were able to reinforce and build collective momentum for a change-oriented perspective on teaching and schooling. Through purposeful activities and assignments, participants had repeated opportunities to adopt new roles and responsibilities, apply new understandings, and practice leadership within a setting where initial beliefs and assumptions could be challenged and ultimately transformed.

Of note, study results complicate the claim by Lieberman and Friedrich (2010) that teacher leaders' "identity develops slowly over time as one's expertise develops" (p. 26). Findings from this study suggest that teacher leadership identity formation is both subtle and profound, resulting not only from time and expertise but also from teachers' perception of and readiness for expanded leadership roles and responsibilities. For the 12 teachers interviewed, learning to be teacher leaders was, in their words, profoundly life changing and transformative. This transformation hinged on an understanding of teacher leadership that allowed them to maintain a connection to the classroom while serving as a resource outside of the classroom. If these findings hold true across settings, teacher leadership preparation programs would be wise to include opportunities for teachers to explore their understandings and conceptions of a teacher leader's identity, role, and work. As Wenger (1998) asserted, identity "is a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities" (p. 5). Teacher leadership programs provide a perfect context for promoting evocative conversations about identity and leadership with and among like-minded peers.

Future research might test the efficacy of embedding intentional learning about leadership identity into the context of teacher leadership preparation as a strategy for equipping teachers with the skill and will to challenge personal beliefs and assumptions, as well as organizational norms that often discourage and thwart leadership by teachers. In doing so, we might understand more clearly the often-weak relationship between leadership preparation and leadership practice.

Study Limitations

Qualitative studies of this kind allow us a peek into the thinking of study participants. However, we cannot assume that the experiences reported here are representative of all participants in the Academy, teacher leaders in other preparation programs, or even teacher leaders working outside of a formal program of study. Thus, it is hard to overlook the fact that the study sample was composed of women teaching in suburban schools. For them, affiliating with the ever-expanding Academy network served as a powerful affinity group, which then became a foundation for the kinds of transformative learning that supported personal and professional identity transformation during the program and beyond. Further research into how teacher leaders—including those with different personalities and styles, working in different school settings, with different preparation for the work, from different demographic backgrounds, with different years of experience, and of different genders—transition from teacher to teacher leader is warranted.

Conclusion

More than two decades ago, Smylie and Denny (1990) predicted that teachers themselves might ultimately emerge as their own barriers to reform.

> Caught in social and normative contradictions concerning teachers' work with students, administrators, and other teachers, efforts to professionalize teaching through job redesign and organizational restructuring may be rejected or compromised by the very group these efforts are intended to serve. (p. 257)

To date, much of the teacher leadership–oriented literature highlights the role of strong leadership and professional cultures in supporting teacher leaders (Angelle & DeHart, 2011; Lieberman, 1988; Margolis & Huggins, 2012; Muijs & Harris, 2003, 2007). Study findings complicate this notion and suggest that the development of supportive administrative structures be combined with the development of teachers' leadership identity. Without such a focus, teachers who fail to identify as leaders may never realize their leadership potential.

Ultimately, the Great Lakes Academy teaches us that it is not enough to arm prospective teacher leaders with information, or even to inspire them with a vision of what is possible. Teachers also need to believe they can become leaders. Through the invitation to participate in the Academy, teachers were recognized and affirmed as potential leaders. Then, within a nurturing circle of peers, these emerging leaders were coached and guided as they transformed their identities from teacher to teacher leader. The Academy motto, *Lead from where you stand*, reflects the journey of a group of educators who understand they now stand somewhere very different from where they began. Importantly, that place where they now stand is on their own terms.

Note

1. Great Lakes Teacher Leadership Academy as well as names of districts and program participants reported in this article are pseudonyms. In addition, the author has never had a formal relationship with the Academy. Neither is she a program graduate nor has she served in a leadership, instructional, or advisory capacity to the program.

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