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Partnership in Teacher Excellence Program: Teacher Leaders Reflect on Their Master's Degrees

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Abstract

Teacher leaders can foster professional growth among colleagues, increase student learning, and improve schools. Unfortunately, teacher leaders often do not receive formal training to lead. To remedy this problem, school districts and universities have partnered to develop master's degrees in teacher leadership. This qualitative multiple case study examined five elementary teachers and five secondary teachers who graduated from such a master's degree program. The study found that teacher leaders in the master's degree program acquired new knowledge, felt more confident to pursue teacher leadership roles, developed professional relationships with colleagues, and valued the support provided by the district and the university.

Keywords

Teacher Leadership Preparation, University and District Collaboration, Graduate Degree

1. Introduction

A growing body of research conducted during the last two decades indicates that teacher leaders can foster professional growth among colleagues, increase student learning, and improve schools (Blair, 2016; Mangin & Stoelinga, 2008; Visone et al., 2022; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Teacher leaders bring about positive change because they possess in-depth knowledge of pedagogy, leadership, students, and schools; they also have strong interpersonal skills for building professional relationships with colleagues and other stakeholders (Berg, 2019). Teacher leaders use their knowledge and skills to identify problems and generate solutions to challenges (Carver, 2016).

Research also shows that teacher leaders often lack formal preparation to lead (Buchanan et al., 2020; Smylie & Eckert, 2018). When they complete their initial teacher certification, they generally do not receive leadership training. Instead, they complete coursework focused primarily on pedagogy (Ross et al., 2011). Later, when they are asked to serve in teacher leadership roles, they learn to lead through on-the-job experience (Carver, 2016).

In response to the lack of leadership preparation, universities have developed graduate degrees for practicing teachers interested in teacher leadership (Ado, 2016; Carver, 2016). Although "university degree programs, certificates, and endorsements in teacher leadership seem to be on the rise," little research exists about these teacher leadership preparation programs (Wenner & Campbell, 2017: p. 136). When York-Barr and Duke (2004) conducted the first seminal literature review of teacher leadership, the published scholarship included only a few empirical studies on preparation. When Wenner and Campbell (2017) conducted the second major literature review of teacher leadership, examining what they considered to be high-quality studies, they found nine articles related to preparation, and just two of those focused on university-based teacher leadership programs.

The qualitative case study described in this article attempts to add to the small number of studies conducted by previous researchers and to answer the question, *What happens when a university and a school district co-construct a master's degree program for the purpose of preparing teachers to become teacher leaders*? The study focuses on teachers who graduated from the program. To alleviate confusion, the term *teacher* is used consistently throughout this article, even though the teachers were *students* while enrolled in the graduate program.

The problem is important for several reasons. First, universities and school districts need to know how to prepare teachers who will lead and foster change in education. As Squires and LeTendre (2020) state, "Schools have become complex organizations that require diverse areas of expertise, and leveraging teachers' strengths into new roles is critical for school improvement" (p. 43). Next, teacher leaders can champion improvement efforts because of their unique position in the school organizational structure; they are located hierarchically between administrators and students (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2008). They understand both teaching students at the classroom level and managing operations at the school level. Furthermore, universities and districts benefit from partnering and sharing responsibility for their own institutions' renewal and for assisting each other (Goodlad & McMannon, 2004). It is to both institutions' advantage to collaborate on the "jobs of research, invention and dissemination of knowledge about teaching" (Margolis, 2008).

2. Literature Review

For this study, a broad search was conducted of the scholarly literature published since 2013, the last year that Wenner and Campbell (2017) included in their seminal review. The search uncovered 14 empirical studies related to master's degree

programs in teacher leadership. An analysis of the studies indicates variance according to who created the programs, why the programs were developed, and what courses were required in the programs. The following three sections provide an overview of the analysis.

2.1. Creators of the Programs

The programs varied according to who created them. Five studies described college or university faculty members who worked closely with educators in a district to develop the programs. After Palmer (2018) secured a federal grant, she collaborated with Austin Independent School District, her local school district in Texas, to co-develop the master's degree. Similarly, Dennis (2016) explained that her program in Florida "came to fruition through an extensive partnership with Hillsborough County Public Schools" (p. 15). Describing a program in the Netherlands, Snoek et al. (2017) stated that "the programme was developed and monitored in close cooperation between the university and the vocational college staff" (p. 32). Vocational education in the Netherlands prepares "students aged 16 - 21 for mid-level professions" (p. 31). Devin et al. (2016) stated that "the Educational Leadership Department in the College of Education at Kansas State has worked with eight different partners in designing and delivering site-based customized 30-hour master's degree programs in educational leadership to 19 individual cohorts" (p. 44). The fifth study (Mentzer et al., 2014) described a master's degree that prepares teacher leaders in science, technology, engineering, and math. The program is "a partnership that gathers and merges the expertise of four essential entities (K-12 school districts, higher education, the renewable energy industry, and informal science education sites) in the economic revitalization of the Great Lakes Region" (p. 101). The remaining seven studies did not describe how their programs were developed.

For the study in this article, district administrators approached university administrators about developing the program. Both groups worked closely together during the planning phase to clarify the program's vision and develop the experience for the teachers.

2.2. Purposes of the Programs

The reasons for creating the programs varied. Five of the 14 programs aimed to improve either specific subjects taught in schools or specific student populations. The program described by Mentzer et al. (2014) attempted to "transform science teachers into science teacher leaders" because of the need to strengthen science instruction in schools (p. 108). For the degree at her university, Palmer (2018) outlined three objectives: foster in teachers an assets orientation toward bilingual learners, develop teachers' knowledge of bilingual and ESL education, and develop teachers' capacity for teacher leadership. Also focusing on English language learners, Ankeny et al. (2019) described a program that helped teachers in rural settings "become reflective practitioners, examine their current pedagogical practices, and

make instructional changes to improve English learners' learning" (p. 5). Similarly, Spies et al. (2020) recalled the development of a master's degree program that would close the gap between theory and practice and prepare practicing teachers to teach English language learners in Nevada. The goals of the program in Kansas included helping teachers to "improve student performance, adjust to changing demographics and population shifts, adjust to changes in the community, and close the achievement gap" (Devin et al., 2016: p. 45).

In addition to assisting specific student populations, three programs espoused social justice goals. Buchanan et al. (2020) attempted to help teachers foster change in their schools. Explaining their program's social justice commitment, Berg et al. (2014) wrote, "From the beginning, program faculty imagined empowering teachers to become leaders committed to making schools culturally relevant and socially just through supportive learning environments that set and maintain high expectations for all students" (p. 201). Miller et al. (2022) described a program in Kentucky aimed at promoting social justice by requiring teachers to develop projects that engage colleagues in equity-oriented activities. In earlier studies, Bradley-Levine (2012) examined a program with the goal of developing teacher leaders with a critical consciousness, which is defined as people who "observe the problems within reality, examine all potential causes of these problems within the historical and social context, explore possible responses, and then select the most reasonable of those possible responses for action" (p. 754).

Two studies focused on teacher leadership roles. Practicing teachers in the program in Florida learned how to mentor teacher candidates (Dennis, 2016). The program in the Netherlands gave teachers opportunities to act as boundary crossers, meaning that teachers made contributions in both school and university settings (Snoek et al., 2017). The teachers in DiLucchio and Leaman's (2023) study became teacher-researchers in their schools. They developed an inquiry stance, conducted teacher research studies, and shared their findings with colleagues. Although nine studies stated specific reasons for creating the program, three did not.

For the study in this article, the district and university administrators who created the program wanted teachers to become experts in their subject areas and facilitators of professional development for colleagues on their campuses.

2.3. Requirements of the Programs

The master's degree programs required teachers to complete a series of courses over one to two years. Many programs offered a combination of in-person and online components (Berg et al., 2014; Squires & LeTendre, 2020). Teachers often completed courses in which they learned about teacher leadership (Mentzer et al., 2014), school leadership (Berg & Zoelick, 2018), collaboration and networking (Squires & LeTendre, 2020), and strategies for enacting school change (Buchanan et al., 2020). As a degree requirement, teachers conducted action research studies in which they solved classroom- and school-related problems (Snoek et al., 2017).

For the study in this article, the graduate program took two years to complete.

The program offered in-person courses that were taught at the university and in schools in the district. Teachers completed a teacher leadership course in which they learned about teacher leadership, leadership, and models of professional development.

2.4. Theoretical Support

Two developmental theories provide underlying support for this research study. Lambert et al. (1996) proposed a developmental framework in which teacher leaders develop over time. Teachers first learn about teacher leadership and then lead in small, structured ways. As they gain more knowledge and experience, they assume more complex leadership roles. Lambert et al. (1996) write, "Professional development for the teacher leader needs to begin in the teacher's initial teacher preparation experience at the university and continue throughout his or her career" (p. 146). For the study in this article, teachers began their journey by first returning to the university in order to learn about teacher leadership and ways that they could lead in their schools.

A second theory explains how teachers gradually acquire new knowledge. Guskey (2002) theorized that teachers become more knowledgeable by participating in professional development, which he defined as "a systematic effort to bring about change in the classroom practices of teachers, in their attitudes and beliefs, and in the learning outcomes of students" (p. 381). Guskey proposed a three-step model of professional development. Teachers first engage in professional development in which they learn new information. Second, they test their new knowledge in a classroom setting. Third, if the new practices work and students learn, then teachers change the way they teach. For the study in this article, teachers completed a master's degree as professional development. They acquired more knowledge about leadership and pedagogy.

3. Method

This article presents findings from a descriptive case study of teachers who graduated from a master's degree program co-developed by a university and a school district (Yin, 2018). The case is defined as a teacher in the program.

3.1. District and University Partners

Administrators from Eanes Independent School District (ISD) and Texas State University (both real names) came together in 2006 and co-developed the Partnership in Teacher Excellence Program (PTEP), a master's degree program for teachers in the district (Bond, Goodwin, & Summers, 2013). Eanes ISD is a high-performing suburban school district located in the southwestern part of Austin, Texas. The district serves approximately 8,000 students in six elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. Enrollments steadily increased by more than 1,000 students during the 12 years when PTEP existed. Student demographics remained fairly stable during this period. According to data published on the dis-

trict's website in 2024, 67% of the students are White; 14% Hispanic; 13% Asian; 1% African American; and 5% Other. The district also reports that 3.3% of the students are economically disadvantaged, 2.2% are English language learners, 9.8% are students with special needs, and 9.5% are gifted. According to data from the website, the district employed 605 teachers in 2024. The typical teacher had 12.7 years of experience, with 55% of the 605 teachers having more than 11 years of experience and 40% of them holding advanced degrees.

Texas State University is a large, comprehensive public university located 38 miles south of Eanes ISD in San Marcos, Texas. During the 12 years that PTEP existed, the university's enrollment grew steadily to 40,000 students. The federal government designated the university as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and as an Emerging Research Institution. Founded in 1899 as a normal school, Texas State University has remained true to its original mission of preparing preservice and in-service teachers for the classroom. To prepare teachers, the university partners with 25 school districts in the region. These partnerships have been a hallmark of the education department for more than three decades.

3.2. Overview of PTEP

The administrators who created PTEP identified overarching goals for the master's degree program. The teachers "would become experts in their subject areas, deliver high-quality classroom instruction to their K-12 students, provide ongoing professional development to their colleagues in the district, and serve in a variety of teacher leadership roles" (Bond et al., 2013: p. 91). Refer to this article for details about the program's goals.

PTEP was a master's degree program that required teachers to complete 12 courses. The required major included eight courses, three of which focused on research. The first of the three provided an overview of various types of educational research and the steps for conducting action research studies. During the course, teachers reflected on their own instruction, identified a research question of interest, and secured official permission from the university and district to conduct the action research study. In the second research course, teachers designed data collection instruments, implemented their action research projects, and collected data. For the third course, teachers analyzed the data and presented orally the findings to a panel of scholars. Teachers had the option of developing a scholarly manuscript based on their study's findings and submitting it to a journal for publication. For the major, teachers completed five additional courses: teacher leadership, instructional supervision, educational technology, creativity, and grant writing.

Along with the 8-course major, teachers selected a 4-course minor that matched their individual professional interests and goals. The available minors were elementary education, special education, gifted education, and reading education. If students were not interested in these minors, they could take courses in other departments, such as music, English, math, and science, to satisfy the minor requirements. The courses for PTEP remained fairly consistent over the years; however, the pro-

gram coordinators and professors updated and refined the experience annually.

3.3. Researcher's Positionality

In 2006, when creating PTEP, university administrators asked me to develop and teach the teacher leadership course, which was offered each June when a new cohort began the program. After the teachers completed the course, I stayed in contact with them as they matriculated through the program, and I saw many of them at recruiting events for the next cohort. Subsequently, I have regularly conducted research involving the teachers, and through these experiences, I have developed strong professional relationships with them.

3.4. Participants

The first cohort began in the fall of 2007, and the last teacher in the last cohort graduated in the spring of 2019. In total, 78 teachers in 11 cohorts matriculated through the two-year program. The overall completion rate was 91%, with 71 of the 78 teachers graduating from the program. At the time of this research study, 26 teachers were still working in the district. The 45 who left the district either retired, secured a position in another district, or left the profession altogether.

I employed a purposive sampling technique to select the participants because an analysis indicated that most of the 26 teachers still in the district taught in just one of the six elementary schools and in the high school. I sent a direct email to the graduates in the elementary school and the high school and invited them to participate in the study. Five teachers from the elementary school and five from the high school agreed to participate. The following table provides biographical information about the participants. All names are pseudonyms.

As shown in Table 1, the pseudonyms, cohort numbers, grade level, expertise, and race/ethnicity.

Table 1. The participants' names, cohort, school level, expertise, and race/ethnicity.

Name	Cohort	Level	Expertise	Race/Ethnicity
Jessica	1	Elementary	Science	White
Carol	2	Elementary	ESL	Hispanic
Amy	2	Elementary	Reading	White
Patricia	4	High School	Technology	White
Sally	5	Elementary	Gifted	White
Michael	5	High School	Special Education	White
Elaine	5	High School	Special Education	White
Mary	7	Elementary	Reading	White
Anthony	9	High School	Music	White
Susan	11	High School	Special Education	White

3.5. Data Collection and Analysis

Three forms of data were collected for the study. First, I conducted a 60-minute focus group interview with the five elementary teachers and another 60-minute focus group interview with the five secondary teachers. I utilized a focus group interview because it had been a while since some had graduated from the program—one participant graduated 12 years ago. The focus group was a reunion for the teachers, and their comments refreshed each other's memories and enriched the quantity and quality of the collected data. I asked open-ended questions about PTEP, such as *What parts of PTEP were good? What changes might we make to PTEP or a similar master's degree program in the future? What did you learn in the teacher leadership course? What information did you ultimately use?* I purposely asked open-ended questions that were not leading because I wanted the participants to have maximum freedom in what they would share. I recorded and transcribed the interviews myself.

After the focus group interviews, I scheduled a 60-minute interview with each participant, the second form of data. Because of the participants' busy schedules, I conducted the interviews via Zoom. I asked questions, such as *What is your understanding of teacher leadership? Have you served as a teacher leader since graduating from PTEP? If so, explain.* I also used the interviews as an opportunity to probe more deeply into the participants' comments from the focus groups.

Artifacts used during the master's degree program that were available in the department's office served as the third data source, to wit, the advising sheets that guided the teachers through the program and the syllabi that professors used for the courses in the program.

The data sources were analyzed according to the constant comparative analysis (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). For the first step, I coded all data. I read and reread the transcripts and artifacts multiple times to refine the codes. As I worked with the data, I revised my interpretations using the constant comparative method until I was satisfied that the codes reflected a satisfactory understanding of the information (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Second, as I worked with the data, themes began to emerge. If a theme appeared in three individual interviews and the artifacts, it was treated as a major theme. The themes were organized into four major categories as I explain below in the findings section.

To strengthen the findings' trustworthiness, I member-checked all interviews with the participants. I asked them to verify a summary of their interview so that my interpretation was accurate. During the study, I maintained a reflexive journal in which I recorded my initial thoughts about the data and clarified my thinking about the themes.

4. Findings

This qualitative case study sought to determine what happens when a university and a school district co-construct a master's degree program to prepare teachers to become teacher leaders. Emerging from the data analysis were four themes: the

teachers 1) acquired new knowledge and skills to improve their teaching, 2) felt confident to pursue new teacher leadership roles in their schools, 3) forged stronger professional relationships with colleagues, and 4) valued the support from the district and university.

4.1. Theme: Acquisition of New Knowledge and Skills

When the district and university administrators advertised the master's degree, they told teachers that a program goal was to improve the quality of instruction. Amy recounted, "They said that they could make you better doing what you want to do. For me, I didn't want to be an administrator. I wanted to continue being a teacher. I wanted to do what I'm doing and do it better."

4.1.1. Research

The teachers came to understand the role and importance of research. Jessica stated:

> It was eye-opening to discover the amount of research in our profession, and its purpose is to help us grow professionally. We should not base decisions on our gut feelings or our emotions. We should look for quality research that's actually being done.

After learning that many research articles follow a pattern, Anthony added, "I remember reading all those studies. What was helpful was learning which sections of an article are the most important." He continued, "It's okay to jump to a specific section. You don't have to read the entire article. You don't have to feel guilty for not reading every word."

4.1.2. Inquiry Stance

As the teachers learned how to conduct action research in their classes, they developed an inquiry stance toward teaching. Jessica stated, "I learned that if you're curious about something in your classroom, there's something that you can do to find out about it. You can conduct an action research study." The teachers learned to analyze their teaching and take steps to improve it on their own. When asked, all teachers excitedly shared the research projects they had conducted. Their studies focused on questions, such as the relationship between physical exercise and executive functioning in math, the impact of playing video games on students' intelligence, the role of cursive handwriting in learning, the perspectives of parents about an ESL program, and the use of science notebooks.

4.1.3. Reflection

During the program, the teachers learned how to reflect on their teaching and why reflection is important. Carol explained, "The professors asked us to reflect on what we were doing and to maintain a journal. Over time, we realized that reflection is important." Sally echoed the idea by stating:

> I had been teaching a while, and then I came back and got my master's degree. The courses allowed me to reflect on my teaching. The experience gave

me a new lens to examine my teaching and notice what's important. When I think about my lessons now, I think more deeply about them. I reflect more. I am more focused on what's best for students.

4.1.4. Creativity

The teachers learned how to foster creativity in themselves and in their students. They enthusiastically recalled an assignment in the creativity course. Jessica explained:

The professor had us complete a long-term creativity project that would develop our own creativity. The project had nothing to do with our work at school as teachers. Creativity is something that you develop. It was wonderful for her [the professor] to put that into action with us and for us to reflect on the experience. She taught us that this is what we should be doing with our kids.

The professor wanted the teachers to identify a topic of interest or a new passion and then develop it. Examples of the creativity projects included creative writing, woodworking, and glass blowing.

4.1.5. Leadership

The teachers' conceptualization of leadership changed during the program. A shift occurred in their thinking about themselves as leaders. Michael explained, "The teacher leadership course and the other courses taught me about myself and how I interact with other teachers and how I take into account my background and other people's backgrounds." He continued, "The classes helped me to be more introspective and to understand where I'm coming from. I learned more about myself through the courses and how I fit into this educational system, how I can improve it. I'm more aware." Explaining how her understanding of leadership changed, Mary added:

I had a shift in mindset. I realized that I don't have to be a principal or assistant principal to lead. I can still be a leader on my campus and make a difference. I can do it in my own reserved, quiet way. I don't have to be on the stage and in the spotlight because that's not what I want to do. I still want to help.

Similarly, Elaine shared, "I realized that there are different kinds of leaders and different ways that you can lead."

4.2. Theme: Confidence to Pursue Teacher Leadership Roles

By participating in the program, the teachers gained confidence in themselves as leaders, prompting them to pursue formal and informal teacher leadership roles.

4.2.1. Team Leader

Mary pursued the formal position of grade-level team leader in her elementary school, allowing her to initiate a new approach for building community and sharing ideas. She recalled:

We started having lunch every Friday together as a team, and it was so beneficial. It was such a simple idea. It wasn't hard to implement. It was a time we set aside to talk about school, give advice to each other, or just relax and talk about our weekend. The time together with your team is valuable because these teachers are doing the exact same thing that you're doing. Eating lunch together was a type of mentoring or peer coaching in a very relaxed environment. Everyone was more comfortable sharing and giving advice.

4.2.2. Catalyst for Change

Serving as an informal teacher leader, Jessica recommended changing how colleagues worked together in her school. She explained:

I had an idea that came from my time as a student in PTEP. I proposed that we do vertical teaming. I shared the idea with my principal, and he agreed. We formed vertical teams, and I persuaded teachers at every grade to use science notebooks. We piloted the notebooks in first grade and expanded them to all grades. It was cool to see.

4.2.3. Student Advocate

Susan launched a new initiative for her students with special needs. She explained:

I had this idea burning in the back of my head to start an inclusive lunch club. I wanted to have a club that met during lunch, just like a social hour, for my kiddos in special education and for other kiddos who just wanted to make new friends. I started the lunch club this year, and it has been really nice. Many parents have told me how much their kids love coming to school on Mondays because they know that they're going to see their friends during lunch. It's just little things like that [that] really hit you and make you realize that "Man! This is why I'm doing what I'm doing." The ideas that I have in the middle of the night, I can put them into action. I can make something happen.

4.2.4. Mentor

Sally began informally mentoring new teachers on her campus. She noted:

Many teachers who went through the program are still teaching and are now sharing their expertise with new teachers. I gained confidence from the program to do that. I had mentored students before, but after going through PTEP, I felt confident to mentor teachers. I mentored a first-grade teacher, and now she's a team leader.

4.3. Theme: New Collegial Relationships

As a result of the program, the teachers forged lifelong professional relationships with colleagues. These relationships yielded multiple benefits.

4.3.1. Lifelong Friendships

All teachers in their focus groups and individual interviews mentioned the lifelong friendships that emerged from PTEP. Sally summarized the comments by saying:

> We built close relationships during our master's program, and I'm still really close to the members of my cohort. When we see each other, we stop and talk. Many of us are still in the district. Although some have changed positions, we're still a tight-knit group.

4.3.2. District-Wide Perspective

The teachers matriculated through PTEP in cohorts, with teachers coming from all nine schools in the district. The cohort model created opportunities for teachers to get to know colleagues from other campuses. Jessica explained:

> I really liked the camaraderie. You were going through graduate school with a group, and we got closer to the people in our cohort. What was great was that I made connections across the campuses. Even though I had been in the district for four years, I didn't really know that many people on the other campuses. It was during PTEP when I started building connections with teachers on different campuses. And the experience made me feel more part of the district.

Noting how the experience broadened her perspective, Patricia added, "I liked that some classes were dedicated only to Eanes teachers. That was really a game-changer because it allowed me to meet teachers from the younger grades. I gained an understanding of the big picture of our district." Finally, Sally concluded, "I now have friends all over the district who I can talk to. When I see them, I'm like, 'What are you doing? Here's what we're doing. We should do something together.' The experience made our community even stronger."

4.3.3. Mentoring and Sharing

The teachers in the cohort acted as mentors to colleagues in subsequent cohorts. When applying to the program, teachers reached out to graduates. Carol explained, "It was good to talk to the previous group and ask questions. And the group after us could ask us questions. It was really nice to help out each other."

Mary noted, "It was super helpful knowing that there were teachers on campus whom I could ask, 'Do you still have this textbook? Or what was that class like? Would it be something that I would be interested in?' " The teachers quickly got answers to specific questions. They even saved money by sharing graduation gowns. They laughed and said, "Yes! We all passed down those graduation gowns to teachers in the next cohort."

Besides information pertaining to the program, the teachers shared teaching ideas. Jessica described a colleague at another school. She said, "One teacher in my cohort was a seventh-grade science teacher, and I was teaching fifth grade science at the time. It was great to share resources related to science."

4.4. Theme: Support from the District and University

The teachers identified multiple supports from the district and the university that enhanced the program.

4.4.1. On-Site Courses

The teachers appreciated the times and locations of the courses. During the fall and spring semesters, the university offered selected courses at a school in the district. The professors came to the district and taught the courses on site. The teachers liked the convenience. Carol explained, "It was very convenient for us. When we finished with our schoolwork, we could simply walk to the classroom on our campus or drive to a nearby school in the district." Susan added, "Holding class on our campuses was nice because we didn't have to go to San Marcos during rush hour." Mary stated, "You could tell that there was a conscientious effort to make it easier and convenient for us." During summers, teachers carpooled to courses on the university campus.

4.4.2. Financial Support

The teachers appreciated the financial support provided by a foundation associated with the district that paid half the tuition for each teacher's degree. Amy stated, "Oh! The financial support was huge. That was a reason that I did it. I don't think that I could have done it otherwise. It would have taken me a long time to pay off the student loans." Anthony stated, "It was very generous of them to support us working on our master's degree. I'm grateful for their support and belief in us as teachers."

Furthermore, the teachers appreciated that they could drop out without penalty. Susan noted:

> The district made it clear that they were paying for us to get this master's degree, but they said that, if at any point in time we had to quit, we would just pay back whatever percentage we used. The district understood that sometimes life happens. The district wasn't interested in penalizing us.

4.4.3. District and University Program Coordinators

The teachers praised the two coordinators who managed the program's day-to-day operations. Lisa Smith (pseudonym), the district's coordinator, recruited teachers and answered questions about the program. Sally commented, "I asked Lisa if she thought that I could do the program and she said, 'Yes, I think that you can do it. It would be great for your own children to see you go back to school.'" The teachers trusted Lisa and valued her opinion. Noting how she trusted Lisa, Amy explained:

> In all honesty, I think that Lisa being part of PTEP made it easier for us because we knew her. We knew that she was working hard to make PTEP a quality program. I was comfortable pursuing the degree because she endorsed it.

The teachers also noted Lisa's in-depth knowledge of the district and how she helped them follow the district's guidelines regarding tuition, textbooks, laptop computers, and other supplies.

Dr. Tessa Jackson (pseudonym), the university's coordinator, advised the teach-

ers about the minors, substituted courses in the degree, solved registration problems, and navigated the university's bureaucracy. Michael noted, "Dr. Jackson facilitated that process well and helped us on the front end. She made the process smoother."

4.4.4. Professors

The teachers acknowledged the support the professors provided. Amy noted, "We had a positive experience because of the professors. We felt that our professors were really going to be great and that we would have the best that Texas State University had to offer. They really pushed us academically." The teachers appreciated the professors' differentiating the curriculum and the assignments. Mary stated, "I remember a professor saying, 'I know that you're currently teaching, so I'm not going to give you the same coursework that I would typically give my preservice teachers. I want to make this course as meaningful as possible.' "

5. Discussion

This study examined a master's degree program for developing teacher leaders who would teach well, facilitate professional learning for colleagues in their district, and serve in teacher leadership roles. Four themes emerged from the data. The teachers acquired new knowledge, felt more confident to pursue teacher leadership roles, developed professional relationships with colleagues, and valued the support provided by the district and university. The following section examines the findings in light of existing scholarship.

5.1. Findings Affirmed by Previous Scholarship

Four findings from the study appear in previous research about teacher leadership preparation. The first was the focus on reflection, inquiry, and action research, all of which are important skills for teacher leaders. In PTEP, the teachers learned new pedagogical information, analyzed their teaching, identified areas of their instruction for improvement, and learned how to conduct action research to address areas of need.

The published scholarship notes that graduate programs in teacher leadership often focus on developing the skills of reflection, inquiry, and action research (Buchanan et al., 2020; Carver, 2016; Hunzicker, 2012; Snoek et al., 2017). With these skills, teacher leaders improve their own instruction by analyzing themselves, questioning their work, and experimenting with new ways of teaching. Furthermore, with these skills, teacher leaders "support other educators through coaching, mentoring, professional learning communities, and collaborative curriculum and pedagogical development" (Buchanan et al., 2020: p. 585). In short, teacher leaders become more aware of their ability to become positive change agents in their schools (Palmer, 2018).

A second finding appearing in this study and in the literature was the teacher leaders' pursuit of leadership roles. The teachers in PTEP did not want to become administrators. Instead, they wanted to remain in the classroom instructing stu-

dents while simultaneously pursuing leadership roles. They were interested in serving as mentors to new teachers; facilitators of professional learning communities; team and department leaders; and specialists for teaching gifted students, students with special needs, and English language learners. The teachers credited the master's degree program for giving them confidence to assume these positions.

The published literature showcases teacher leaders committed to working with students in the classroom while leading beyond the classroom (Squires & LeTendre, 2020). The research shows teacher leaders serving in roles such as instructional coaches (Buchanan et al., 2020), advocates for English language learners (Ankeny et al., 2019), professional developers (Smylie & Eckert, 2018), and contributors to a school's overall success (Snoek et al., 2017). Furthermore, the literature shows that graduates, after acquiring new knowledge of pedagogy and leadership during their master's degree programs, felt more confident and empowered to assume teacher leadership roles (Carver, 2016; Devin et al., 2016; Hunzicker, 2012). As Mentzer et al. (2014) explain, "Being confident in one's knowledge and skills is the first step to developing the self-efficacy to becoming a confident leader" (p. 106).

A third finding was the teacher leaders' desire to collaborate and share their expertise with colleagues. The teachers in PTEP shared their expertise formally by engaging in one-on-one peer coaching and developing professional learning communities with small groups of teachers to study specific topics. The teachers also shared their expertise informally by exchanging teaching ideas during lunch meetings and while carpooling to the university for classes.

Collaboration is frequently mentioned in the published literature about graduate programs for teacher leaders (Buchanan et al., 2020; Hunzicker, 2012; Palmer, 2018; Squires & LeTendre, 2020). Teachers demonstrate leadership when they come together, share their professional knowledge, and collaborate on projects. As Cosenza (2015) states, "Sharing best practices gives teachers a chance to step outside their classrooms and have influence throughout the school site" (p. 93). When teachers work cooperatively, they become empowered as leaders and learn how to lead (Berry, 2019). Teacher leaders who collaborate and have support from colleagues and administrators have a positive impact on students (Dodman, 2022; Visone et al., 2022).

A fourth finding was the development of a district-wide perspective, a positive outcome not anticipated by the creators of PTEP. By participating in the program, the teachers developed a greater knowledge of and appreciation for the district. The elementary school and high school teachers got to know one another. During class and carpooling times, the teachers talked about school-related issues. The program afforded them time to share experiences and learn about events at the other schools.

Scholars have found that teacher leadership master's programs help teachers to network with teachers in other schools (Devin et al., 2016). Participating in a graduate program expands the teacher leaders' vision of the district and develops a

stronger sense of the entire organization (Snoek et al., 2017).

5.2. Findings New to the Scholarship

The study yielded four findings that appear to add to the existing scholarship. First, the master's degree taught the teachers about research and its value for leaders. Previous scholars have stated that research is important in teacher leadership development. Squires and LeTendre (2020) argue that teacher leaders need to know about research, but these scholars never explain specifically which aspects of research are important. In a study about the preparation of preservice teacher leaders, Ado (2016) found that teachers need to know current research on teaching and share the information with colleagues. Again, this scholar's advice is generic. In the study described in this article, specifics about research are provided. For example, teacher leaders need to know how to find appropriate research, locate useful information in a research article, and apply the information to their leadership endeavors. It is especially important to know how to use research to foster professional growth in themselves and others.

Second, the master's degree taught the teacher leaders about the importance of creativity. As they completed the creativity course, they expanded their thinking about undeveloped talents in themselves, colleagues, and students. The teacher leaders learned that they need to take steps to develop the talents of followers. Previous scholars have claimed that teacher leaders need to be able to identify the talents of followers (Wenner & Campbell, 2017); however, the scholarly literature on teacher leader preparation omits the topic. This finding suggests that teacher leadership development programs need to teach budding teacher leaders how to recognize and cultivate the talents of the people they lead.

Third, the master's degree created opportunities for the teacher leaders to forge lifelong friendships. The teachers in the program learned how to collaborate or work cooperatively to accomplish school-related tasks. What unexpectedly emerged were the personal friendships that continue to this day. These friendships blossomed during lunch and carpools. The published literature mentions the development of collaborative professional relationships built on trust (Bradley-Levine, 2017) and encouragement (Hunzicker, 2012). It also states that teachers enjoy working with other like-minded colleagues (Carver, 2016); however, it does not note the development of friendships. The study described in this article suggests that a positive byproduct of teacher leadership development is the strengthening of connections among people. As teacher leaders learn to lead, they need opportunities to develop professional relationships and even friendships with others. This finding supports the idea that leadership is relational (Lambert et al., 1996).

Fourth, the master's degree was possible for the teacher leaders because of the district's financial support. The teachers praised the foundation for providing financial aid for tuition and other school-related expenses. The support inspired the teachers to pursue and finish the master's degree. Berg and Zoelick (2018) identify support as one of four key dimensions in their model of teacher leader-

ship. Teacher leaders need support from districts and other entities. These scholars, however, do not include financial support during the preparation phase of becoming a teacher leader. The study described in this article suggests that teacher leaders need fiscal and physical supports in addition to the social, emotional, and cognitive supports.

5.3. Limitations

The study has at least two limitations. First, it focuses on only the teachers' perspective. The research question was to investigate what happens when a university and school district co-develops a master's degree for the purpose of preparing teacher leaders. To fully answer the question, the perspectives of district and university administrators and professors should be included. Second, the study participants should include teachers who started but did not complete the degree. Information from these teachers might identify obstacles that prevent them from finishing the degree.

6. Conclusion

The study's findings suggest that districts and universities can work together to create master's degree programs that support districts' specific needs. The master's degree program in this study included a curriculum focused on research, action research, inquiry, reflection, creativity, and leadership. The program offered key supports, namely courses taught in the district, scholarships for tuition, and university and district program coordinators. Because of these conditions, the teacher leaders who graduated from the program felt confident to pursue formal and informal leadership roles. During the program, they also cultivated friendships with colleagues, developed a greater appreciation for their district, and shared their pedagogical expertise with others. In a study of teacher leadership in a high-performing school district similar to the one in this study, Searby and Shaddix (2008) claim that "teachers are the most important players in the pursuit of continued excellence" (p. 3). The study discussed in this article confirms that if districts and universities collaborate and invest in teachers, teachers can develop their leadership skills and positively impact schools.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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