

Vilma Žydžiūnaitė

# **Teacher Leadership in School for Student Learning**

**Experiences of Lithuanian Teachers**

Žydžiūnaitė

# Teacher Leadership in School for Student Learning

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Vilma Žydžiūnaitė

# Teacher Leadership in School for Student Learning

Experiences of Lithuanian Teachers

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## Preface

The phenomenon of teacher leadership is not new, but at the same time it is new because it does not yet have a unified description, definition, or explanation. There are more unifying moments than dividig ones when we compare the leadership experiences of teachers from different countries in an international context, but still the scientific community in the world does not want to limit and adhere to a strict operational definition when describing and studying the experiences of teachers.

Teacher leadership is associated with courage, determination, creativity, initiation, uniqueness, sociability, intelligence, communication, empathy, accountability, understanding, openness, and honesty. Leadership is impossible without the teacher's ability to influence students, colleagues and the school community, the ability to bring students together and lead teaching through their learning, the ability to motivate students to learn, the ability to support students in creating an authentic meaning of learning, revealing the potential of students' creativity. Leadership is limited if the teacher does not implement service through his/her profession, does not feel the pulse of the school community. Hence, the teacher implements leadership by him/herself, through him/herself and without thinking that it is leadership: the teacher just doing his/her job to the best of their ability and being empathetic to seemingly insignificant things, such as students' and personal moods, emotions, feelings, and immediate experience of social environments. It means that the teacher, devoting him/herself to the students, does not forget him/herself. This is important for a leader. Internal harmony is related to the success of students in teaching and learning.

Why do I keep working on the phenomenon of leadership in education? I started the research on leadership with the concept of the 'intellectual leadership' of a scientist. Later, I studied school administration leadership and teacher leadership: this monograph is my second book on teacher leadership, which to me is an interesting phenomenon that does not have a definitive answer. Research data and results (especially qualitative ones) show that teacher leadership does not concentrate on particular types or styles. Non-leadership types or styles are the essence of teacher leadership. Teacher leadership is about professional life in the school and for the school, with students and for students, with fellow teachers and the school community. The endless search is for balance.

Teachers play many roles on a daily basis, and each one overlaps, so there are not very clear boundaries between them. It would seem that teachers are performing all the roles at the same time.

Professional passion for what one does, i.e. endless enthusiasm, optimism, dedication to the profession and students, continuous learning, conscious professional action and reflection when raising questions – these aspects are of great importance in a teacher's leadership. For me, a teacher leader is related to maturity of personality, knowing what the teacher wants from him/herself, in the context of students' learning of the subject: i.e. a teacher who realises that his/her educational subject is his/her home, and that students are invited to that home to work, to cooperate together, but not to destroy and form their own rules, which the teacher must follow. For me, a teacher leader is a brave person who has clear values related to teaching and learning, and therefore forms the students' awareness that the school is not a 'concert of wishes'.

In the school, the expert, the key actor, is the teacher, who knows where, why and in what ways he/she guides the students through the labyrinths of the learning subject in order to reach the learning goals and results, so as to achieve them together. To me, a teacher leader is a dignified professional who does not shy away from participating in decision-making and does not give in to popular opinion because the students will all do exactly the same when they see it. You can't hide it. For me, the teacher's leadership is the daily work of Sisyphus – rolling a professional stone up the hill, which does not become more difficult, but becomes easier, because students, while learning consciously, motivated and meaningfully, share the joy of teaching with the teacher, and the target of knowledge is found both in breadth and depth.

The aim of this monograph is not to compile existing ideas, attitudes and results accumulated in the international scientific space. The purpose of this book is to reflect the experience of teacher leadership in the authentic context of Lithuanian education, realising that teacher leadership in school is primarily in the name of student learning. One might ask, 'what's new here'? What is new is that the content of the book was not borne from theory, but from empiricism. Empirical results 'dictated' the content of the book with nine parts, which show the reader the teacher leadership experience in the school and the school community. Teachers share their experiences of individual, creative and servant leadership; leadership in helping students express themselves, creating opportunities for students to implement their ideas in the name of better learning achievements, supporting teacher leadership in creating meaningful learning for students and strengthening students' motivation to learn. This is empirical evidence that the essential vector of teacher leadership is student learning.



The book is written in a reader-friendly style, so that there is no overload of scientific citations, and the main focus is on the description and reflections of teachers' experiences. I am fascinated by the most read books of American scientists, which they write based on their research, but provide the text as a pleasant daily reading. Based on the best examples, and not ignoring academic precision, I tried to combine both literary and academic styles in this book. After each chapter, a list of literature is presented, which shows that I did not ignore scientific thought in the international context, and the data was collected and analysed based on a specific research methodology, about which, as well as the entire essence of the research process, I provide information in the introduction of the monograph.

I hope that this monograph will contribute to public understanding, perception and attitudes about the daily leadership of a teacher in a school.

Sincerely yours,

Vilma Žydžiūnaitė

# Introduction

Since the 1980s, teacher leadership has become a topic of growing interest in educational research (Nguyen et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2023; Schott et al., 2020). Teacher leadership refers to a teacher's (self)empowerment to take responsibility in the classroom and beyond; to add value to the professional community of teachers; to influence students, fellow teachers and the school community toward educational practices (Sebastian et al., 2017); and to enhance teaching and learning (Crowther et al., 2009). The influence between teacher and student is reciprocal: it is the teacher who leads in creating the educational interactions with the student as an educational alliance for learning (Lumpkin et al., 2014).

Teacher leadership is connected to professional satisfaction, personal and professional development, student motivation for learning and their academic outcomes (Pan et al., 2023; Schott et al., 2020). Leadership in teaching means a teacher's capability to create an educational relationship with students for their learning, and is interconnected with students' academic motivation to learn (Trigueros et al., 2020), their emotional wellbeing (Furrer & Skinner, 2003), academic success (Pekrun et al., 2017) and exercising virtues (VanderWeele, 2017).

Teacher leadership once referred to teachers designated as 'manager' in such formal roles as department chair, headteacher, member of advisory board, or union representative (Silva, Gimbert, & Nolan, 2000). Since the 1980s, teacher leadership has become less about sharing managerial responsibilities and more about sharing responsibility for making change. The value of professionalism, collegiality and new opportunities for the exercise of teacher leadership became one of focus on educational practice (Lovett, 2018). This development of teacher leadership in educational practice has led to a proliferation of related research (Shen et al., 2020).

Teacher leadership includes a variety of dimensions: coordination, curriculum work, professional development, participation in school change/improvement, community involvement (Harris & Muijs, 2004; York-Barr & Duke, 2004); engaging in learning about his/her practices, experimenting, sharing ideas and learning, mentoring, coaching other teachers, collaborating and reflecting together on collective work, engaging in collective school-wide improvement, and sharing work outside of school/in professional organisations (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012).

Most of the research on teacher leadership in the world and nationally focuses on leadership styles, personal characteristics, and the relationship with students' learning motivation. However, there is still a lack of research and literature related to the impact of teacher leadership on student learning, detailing the specifics of such a relationship from a content point of view.

However, no researcher studying the phenomenon of teacher leadership doubts that it can play a highly significant – and frequently underestimated – role in improving student learning. Specifically, the available evidence about the size and nature of the effects of successful leadership on student learning justifies two assumptions: teacher leadership contributes to what students learn at school, and its effects are usually largest where and when they are needed most (Leithwood et al., 2004). Even these assumptions, which are based on research results, do not reveal the details of the content of the relationship between teacher leadership and student learning. Therefore, the research presented in this monograph fills this empty research space with research evidence-based content.

The aim of research represented in this monograph was to explore and describe the school teachers' leadership experiences with the focus for students' learning.

Research questions in the study were the following:

- What are teachers' leadership experiences for student learning at school and within the school community?
- What does teacher personal leadership include, and how is teacher leadership related to helping students to discover their self-expression through/ in learning?
- What is the impact of teacher leadership in creating opportunities for students to implement their ideas for higher learning achievements?
- How does teacher leadership influence the students' potential to create the meaning of learning?
- What is the role of teacher leadership in promoting students' motivation to learn?

All findings emerged from semi-structured interviews, which were implemented with a sample of 49 teachers who participated in interviews within the qualitative study.

The author of this book in qualitative study looked for participants who have shared an experience, but vary in characteristics and in their individual experiences (Palinkas et al., 2016). In qualitative study, the researcher is not concerned with the quantitative balance between the characteristics of the study participants (Guetterman, 2015). This means that the study did not aim to

include an equal number of teachers according to their work in primary or secondary school(s). The researchers did not aim to classify teachers according to whether they work with primary school, secondary school, or gymnasium students. This study aimed to describe teacher leadership for student learning. Teacher leadership and student learning in this study are not related to school type or other characteristics. An essential criterion for participation in the study was to work as a schoolteacher for at least 3 years.

A total of 49 teachers were interviewed. Characteristics of research participants were as follows: age (24–62 years), gender (15 men, 34 women), work experience (1–48 years (average 21.8 years)), education (tertiary level: 26 university graduates with bachelor's degrees; 17 graduates of pedagogical studies; 6 graduates of studies in other fields (law, ethno-culture, theology, history, physics); and subject (each teacher taught several subjects at school).

The following subjects were taught: foreign languages (4), history (5), Lithuanian language and literature (6), primary education (6), physics (4), mathematics (5), IT (4), philosophy (3), basics of citizenship (2), biology (3), physical education (2), geography (3) and economics (2).

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in the present study. Thus, the researcher had no predetermined set of questions. The research participants were encouraged to talk about areas of particular interest to the researcher and the study. These were very general, or even quite vague at the outset. I let the participants speak freely and responded to what was said to continue the interview. This research also entailed asking the participants to set aside their experiences about teacher leadership for student learning at school, and to share their reflections on the *value* of being a teacher leader for students' learning. Data collection was conducted by directing the research participants to focus on how they think and feel (Kvale, 2007). The researcher asked the participants to describe their experience using their own authentic language, free from pre-existing intellectual and societal conditions.

In this study, I used the following approaches to plan for and conduct the semi-structured interviews (Jamshed, 2014):

1. Preparing for the interview: I wrote down what information I wished to obtain. I did this by reviewing past observations and identifying gaps in the information. I reflected on the areas I needed the participants to elaborate upon.
2. Writing a guide: once I had an idea of what questions I needed to be answered, I wrote a guide that included key topics and questions. Since the interviews were not formal, I knew that they did not have to rigidly adhere

to the guide. I decided to approach specific research participants according to a unified list of topics and questions.

3. Introducing the self and building a rapport: once the interviewee had joined the interview, I introduced myself, became comfortable with the participant, and explained the purpose of the interview. This included presenting topics they planned to cover during the interview.
4. Starting with simple questions and transitioning to specific questions: the specific questions arose when research participants were discussing their experiences.
5. Being mindful of interview questions: asking the right types of questions was vital to facilitate the success of the interviews. I ensured that their questions were open-ended, and they avoided leading questions.
6. Recording and transcribing the interviews: this involved listening to the audio files and typing out the spoken words. I used a text editor to transcribe the interviews manually. This required strong listening skills, a rapid typing speed, and attention to details.

All interviews were conducted in an online format. The specific date and time of the interviews with each study participant were agreed upon individually. The duration of the interviews varied, from a minimum of 64 min to a maximum of 203 min. All interviews were recorded. Each interview was transcribed and analysed consistently one after the other so that new details were not missed and to ensure the implementation of the principle of theoretical saturation in a transparent manner. A total of 49 interviews were conducted, with no new details emerging in the last interview.

Data analysis was performed by using latent qualitative content analysis. Content analysis rests on the assumption that texts are a rich data source with great potential to reveal valuable information about particular phenomena (Kondracki et al., 2002). It is the process of considering both the participant and context when sorting text into groups of related categories to identify similarities and differences, patterns, and associations, both on the surface and implied within (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Julien, 2008; Graneheim et al., 2017). Latent content analysis is defined as interpreting what is hidden deep within the text. In this method, the role of the researcher is to discover the implied meaning in participants' experiences (Kondracki et al., 2002; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Latent content analysis acknowledges that the researcher is intimately involved in the analytical process and that their role is to actively use mental schema, theories, and lenses to interpret and understand the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Latent analysis underscores the importance of the researcher co-creating meaning with the text. Latent content analysis seeks to establish characteristics in the text itself (Kleinheksel et al., 2020). In this

study, latent content analysis was applied. Latent content analysis leverages the researcher's own interpretations of the meaning of the text. This methodological approach relies on codes that emerge from the content using the researcher's own perspectives and mental schema, the distinction between these two types of analyses being in their foci (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). Categories and subcategories are the currency of latent content analysis (Kleinheksel et al., 2020). So, I used the categories to organise and understand the data. Through developing the structure of categories with their content of subcategories process, the data were systematically and rigorously categorised and interpreted. Categories themselves were descriptive labels that symbolically assigned a summative/salient attribute to more than one unit of meaning identified in the text (Saldana, 2009).

The process of qualitative latent content analysis consisted of three phases (Elo et al., 2014):

- Preparation phase (choosing the data collection method, deciding on sampling method and research participants, selecting the unit of analysis).
- Organisation phase (categorisation and abstraction of the data, interpreting the results, checking for representativeness and trustworthiness).
- Reporting phase (reporting results and analysis process).

The result of the research represented in this monograph offers an understanding of teacher leadership from the teacher's point of view. For teachers, their leadership experience at school means understanding the impact of the school environment and to be able to adapt and manage the processes, remaining professional and being able to manage students and classes with behavioural difficulties, understanding the organisational context of the school community in which the teacher has to work and be able to remain dignified in that environment, taking responsibility for the students' learning results, contributing to the development of students' autonomy and self-reliance through conscious and meaningful learning, cultivating students' creativity with non-traditional tasks, reflecting on one's professional limitations and empowering oneself to reduce them, and finding positivity in professional life and using the own experience for professional and personal growth. These findings reflect that teachers see themselves in the context of the school, and take responsibility for students' growth, development, autonomy, awareness in learning and their academic learning outcomes, as they see their leadership role as essential in imparting to students their learning experiences and positive attitudes towards life, learning, professional and personal growth. Teachers see meaning in students' purposeful learning and learning to be reflective in every learning discipline.

Teachers in the research shared their experiences regarding their personal leadership, which they implement through cooperation with school community, peer support among teachers, learning communion of teachers and students in the classroom, and support of the school administration for the implementation of teacher personal leadership. Findings showed that teachers' cooperation with students and fellow teachers, and support of school administration are key factors for successful and meaningful implementation of teacher leadership at school.

Teachers shared experiences about their creative leadership at school and in a classroom. According to the teachers, there are two directions of teacher leadership based on creativity – one is directed to the students and the other is directed to oneself as continuous improvement. Teachers consider the development of student creativity as one of the goals of teaching, which they promote by applying specific teaching methods and being effective as a result: giving to the students tasks and the time to create projects and present them in a class, focusing students to work in groups or teams, forming practical tasks for students, involving them in extracurricular activities, applying innovative technology tools in the lessons and thereby attracting students to learning, integrating their experiences into the lessons and teaching the subject of the lesson based on them, encouraging students' imagination, regardless of the educational subject or topic. Teachers associate their creativity in leadership with adaptability: though adapting to the student's learning abilities and to the context, and the situation in the classroom promptly, 'here and now'.

Teachers in the research do speak about 'servant' leadership, which they implement in everyday professional practices. In the study, servant leadership for teachers means caring support for students, professional conscientiousness when working with (un)motivated students, collective classroom learning community formation through teacher and student empowerment, teacher self-esteem, responsible student care, and professional commitment. The teacher's caring support is manifested in efforts to inspire students with a positive attitude towards the success of conscious learning and to strengthen self-esteem. The collective formation of a learning community in the classroom occurs when the teacher and students recognise that they are learning from each other, i.e. implementing an equal learning partnership between teacher and students. Teachers experience servant leadership through professional dutifulness when working with unmotivated students, as it is necessary to 'employ' willpower and patience. Meanwhile, when working with motivated students, they experience psychological comfort and professional pleasure. Professional commitment to teachers and the teaching profession is integral to their servant leadership. Professional commitment of teachers is experienced by unconditional sacrifice to the profession. Regardless of the complexity of

the professional activity, teachers experience professional satisfaction, which allows them to experience professional dedication. Servant leadership provides opportunities for teachers to experience professional self-esteem related to fellow teachers expressing their opinions and attitudes to each other, focusing on the well-being of students and strengthening student-to-student communication.

Research participants – teachers – recognise their leadership in helping students to discover their self-expression through/in learning. 'Discovering' students' self-expression is action-based, by encouraging them to cooperate for development of their empathy through helping each other and their abilities to solve problems, and discuss; having multifaceted dialogue in a classroom with students by raising questions, searching for common solutions; supporting the implementation of reciprocal feedback about lessons, teaching and learning, and encouraging students to express their opinions openly; applying a diversity of teaching methods integrating technology in developing students' creativity and encouraging students to speak by asking questions; keeping the line of teacher-student partnership in a classroom by making it possible for the students to propose ideas and implement them in the classroom, and creating an atmosphere of equal relations in the classroom; using shared leadership with students and implementing the learning quality through promoting the competition of students' learning and adapting to their abilities.

Teachers in this study reported about their leadership in creating opportunities for students to implement their ideas for better learning achievements. This leadership is related to the following aspects: i) teacher expertise by inspiring students to help teach other, distributing tasks in the classroom in a differentiated manner and applying inclusive teaching/learning methods in organising classroom activities; ii) encouraging students' creativity by being open to their input, encouraging students to take responsibility for learning through developing their independence and creating opportunities for students to reveal their talents; iii) creating an atmosphere of openness, a culture of reflection and of equal discussion, and communication in the classroom.

Teachers discuss their leadership while supporting students to create meaning out of learning. This process they implement through teaching/learning co-creation, personalised student learning, teacher creativity and teachers' didactic accuracy. Teachers are not inclined to provide students with template examples nor insist on one correct solution. They are more inclined to encourage students to try and learn from mistakes, and discover for themselves what is important in a specific part of training, a specific topic, a specific task, etc. Teachers believe that personalised learning can be applied to any subject area and any language, and it works regardless of whether you are teaching children or adults. Teachers motivate students to learn through individualised



assignments and help them to make/create sense of learning by working with students on personalised learning goals. Together with targeted knowledge and abilities, teachers develop students' general social abilities, thus contributing to the meaningfulness of students' learning. Teachers use contextual learning for students to help them experience and make sense of learning. Students are exposed to attractive learning tools and materials that are presented in an attractive way.

Teacher-participants in this study experience their leadership in promoting students' motivation to learn. Here encouragement plays an important role. Teachers need to encourage students' creativity as they learn to listen to each other's ideas, while providing them with opportunities to conduct experiments based on simulating realistic situations. Teachers should encourage students' learning to learn through self-selected tools for decision-making when performing tasks; students' courage in learning; students' curiosity to learn through the questions they ask the teacher and each other; while encouraging students to reflect on personal learning. The other important characteristic of teacher leadership is their capability to create an atmosphere in which students experience the joy of learning, as well as an atmosphere of experimentation in learning, open dialogue and safety, and the freedom of learning.

The research results showed that teacher leadership manifests itself in the relationship with the school community through organising events and targeted meetings, making daily efforts to create the strongest possible connection with the school community, being a leadership example, and thereby motivating the community. In teacher-student interaction, teacher leadership means cooperation and communication with students to create a culture of open, direct and respectful communication in the classroom, supporting students' initiatives and helping them to solve social and psychological problems. Teacher leadership for research participants is experienced through interactions with students' parents by involving them in the development of perceiving the meaning of learning through communication. Also, interactions between the teacher and fellow teachers manifest their leadership as teachers report that leadership from each teacher in the relationship with fellow teachers in the school is relevant when initiating agreements with colleagues. Teacher leadership is also manifested in mutual support and encouragement with fellow teachers.

The chapters of the book are in response to the raised research questions, so I do not present a separate section dedicated to the conclusions. Summaries are in each chapter, as the reader will find. I aimed to present the book in a reader-friendly style, so that the scientific academic text would be easy to read, engaging and motivating to read the book from beginning to the end.

There are not many publications in the world that emphasise teacher leadership for student learning. Therefore, the content of the monograph, based on the evidence of empirical research, helps to understand the uniqueness, innovativeness, contextuality, sensitivity, and authenticity of this connection. The book is valuable for teachers who are expert leaders in their daily practice, but who do not emphasise this to themselves, saying that they are doing ordinary practical work. Such an attitude will spread after reading the monograph, which contains plenty of evidence that the 'ordinary' work of teachers is multifaceted, complex and worthy of great public attention and respect. The book is useful for school leaders, who in their daily activities have to communicate and cooperate with teachers, support them, understand problems and solutions related to teaching, learning, professional development, activities in and outside the school, school representation, psychosocial well-being, professional training, image of the profession and prestige. The content of the book provides opportunities for students, their parents, and the public to understand the essence, mission, complexities, professional dedication, dignity and sacrifice of the teaching profession. Therefore, it is likely that the monograph will contribute to the change of public attitudes about the role of leadership in the teaching profession.

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## Introduction

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