



Becoming a Teacher Leader: Exploring Malaysian In-Service Teachers' Perceptions, Readiness and Challenges

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Abstract

The ever growing demand for educational transformation in Malaysia has placed greater responsibilities upon school leaders to improve school performance. This brings to light the need to explore alternative approaches of school leadership where teachers can be roped in to help, lead and manage the operational tasks of the school. This study explores in-service teachers' perceptions of teacher leadership within their contexts. The study also investigates teachers' readiness and the challenges they face while practising informal teacher leader roles. The study employs a mixed-methods design and data were collected through questionnaires from 587 primary and 189 secondary in-service teachers and semi-structured interviews with eight selected teachers. In-service teachers have positive perceptions towards teacher leadership with most acknowledging familiarity with the concept. They admitted that they were ready to be selected as informal teacher leaders, for professional reasons. The findings further reveal that in-service teachers face challenges from various parties within the school community in executing their role as teacher leaders. Moreover, the findings recommend a framework for policy and school based initiatives for improving teacher leadership practices in Malaysian school context.

Keywords

Teacher leadership
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Introduction

The socio-political contexts of consumerism, knowledge evolution, and globalization had framed the educational development over the last decade (Harris & Lambert, 2003). This has led to a dramatic shift in the role of principals. School leadership no longer relies solely on the principals solving problems and making decisions (Aliakbari & Sadeghi, 2014; Bush, 2015; English, 2006; Levenson, 2014), but it is manifested in dynamic relationship between teachers and school principals (Harris, 2003; Lai & Cheung, 2015). According to Zhang (2013), the restructuring of school leadership from individual leadership to team leadership is especially beneficial for teachers are key players and mediators of change within the school context. By assigning bigger leadership roles to teachers, they could contribute to improving all-inclusive performance of schools, as well as to the growth of their own abilities and

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knowledge (Ash & Persall, 2000). However, teachers' capabilities to lead and influence others are often disregarded (Sanocki, 2013) and leadership roles are not often well-distributed.

The concept of teacher leadership has been evolving for almost last 20 years (Riveros, Newton, & Da Costa, 2013; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). However, less attention was attributed to the concept, due to the dearth of studies focusing on the concept, which remains imprecise as a concept (Beauchum & Dentith, 2004). Teacher leadership is about teachers, individually and collectively influence their colleagues, principals and other members of the school community in improving the pedagogical, instructional and teaching capabilities and concurrently leading others for the benefit of the whole school with or without the formal and informal designation (Beauchum & Dentith, 2004; English, 2006; Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Ross et al., 2011; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Despite the fact that teacher leadership has been well-structured within the school leadership framework, little attention has been undertaken to explore its benefits to the school improvement process (DeHart, 2011; De Villiers, 2010; Frost & Harris, 2003). It has been argued that little research has been carried out to address teacher leadership from various educational perspectives, especially in Asian contexts (Aliakbari & Sadeghi, 2014; Kilinic, 2014; Lai & Cheung, 2015). With this preliminary, this study is noteworthy in which it attempts to fill the gap overlooked by previous researchers in school leadership through local educational systems and contexts. This study, therefore investigates in-service teachers' perspectives and their understanding of teacher leadership. It also investigates the readiness of in-service teachers to hold the position as teacher leaders. Furthermore, the study explores challenges faced by in-service teachers while taking up teacher leadership roles in Malaysian context.

Literature Review

The theory of distributed leadership

The underlying theory adopted in this study is the concept of teacher leadership derived from distributed leadership theory. In his earlier study, Gronn (2000) believed that distributed leadership can be explained as leadership practices that emphasised on the collective phenomenon in organisations where each member involved and played a significant role as leader. In aligning distributed leadership with teacher leadership, Aliakbari and Sadeghi (2014) simplified that both leadership models commonly shared elements in measuring teachers' participation and involvement in the newest approach to school leadership. This included several elements such as advocating teachers' high involvement, collaborative efforts in determining school achievement (Harris & Muijs, 2004; Poekert, 2014), and promoting ingenuity and novelty (Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, 2007).

Theoretically, distributed leadership is defined by Gronn (2000) as an emergent property of a group or a network of interacting individuals while Leithwood, Mascall, and Strauss (2009) argued that distributed leadership reflects more accurately the division of labour in organisational day-to-day routine and reduces error in decision-making based on limited information of a single leader. Empirically, Spillane and Diamond (2007) explained that the distributed perspective of leadership practice is framed as a product of the joint interactions of school leaders, followers, and situation. According to Harris and Muijs (2005), distributed form of leadership creates great potential for building the internal capacity for change and opportunity to lead and take responsibility for areas of change of most importance to the school. Next, they believed that the model of distributed leadership implies a redistribution of power and realignment of authority within an organisation. In discussing this issue, Spillane (2006) emphasised on the practice of stretching the leadership throughout an organisation especially in the school contexts and for leadership not to concentrate in the school heads (Grant, Gardner, Kajee, Moodley, & Somaroo, 2010). Further, distributed leadership seeks to pool the expertise of teachers that produce actions and the benefits are greater than those leaders could achieve alone (Gronn, 2003; Harris, 2014). However, Hargreaves and Fink (2006) viewed distributed leadership as 'bad leadership' because overall patterns of leadership distribution and its large scale effects are likely to conceal significant discrepancies in areas where distributed leadership is less useful. Nevertheless, distributed leadership is desirable because opportunities for organisations to benefit from the capacities of its members are increased (Harris, 2008).

In examining the link, Harris (2008, 2014) contended that distributed leadership provides greater opportunities for teachers to learn from one another. It has been argued that distributed leadership has an impact on student performance as well as teachers' professional learning practices (Silins & Mulford, 2004). Therefore, it is believed that the practice of distributed leadership can enhance the development of teacher leadership as it acknowledges the strength, commitment, expertise, and competence of available human resources. In this study, such human resources refer to teachers as significant individuals in marshalling resources, establishing relationships, and breaking down barriers for open communication (Sanocki, 2013; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Teachers' understanding/perceptions on teacher leadership

Before practising teacher leadership, it is necessary to know whether teachers understand the concept of teacher leadership since they will be assigned as educational leaders and will be given the opportunity to lead (Grant et al., 2010; Harris & Lambert, 2003; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). As such, Phelps (2008) emphasised that teachers' are required to understand the relevant concept and objective of leadership and the adoption of the leadership process before they are appointed as teacher leaders. Adding to the statement, English (2006) emphasised the wisdom of determining whether teachers and school leaders understand the concept of sharing leadership through the implementation of teacher leadership since both parties are part of the school's leadership ecosystem that determines the effectiveness of school's teacher leadership accomplishment. Accordingly, Salahuddin (2010) argued through his study of the Bangladeshi educational system that lack of understanding of teacher leadership became the 'stumbling block' for effective practice of teacher leadership.

Through their comprehensive study in South Africa, Grant et al. (2010) reported that teachers from KwaZulu-Natal believed that they could and were able to lead the school if they were given the chance to lead. They also believed that they have a major role within the classroom context compared to the school administrative tasks. In this sense, we can assume that teachers need to understand the concept of teacher leadership and know their roles as leaders and as agents for change within the school setting. Even though teachers in this study revealed that they understand and know their role as leaders, Grant et al. (2010) argued that most teachers believed that the concept of teacher leadership was restricted to the classroom setting since little evidence showed that teachers were involved in school decision making practices. They therefore concluded that the implementation of teacher leadership within KwaZulu-Natal schools was restricted, limited, and not fully institutionalised. In Maine schools in the United States, Fairman and Mackenzie (2015) studied teachers' understanding of teacher leadership to reveal that teachers were more interested to possess a high knowledge of instruction which influences other teachers than through formal positions. Based on a series of interviews, teachers described leadership as positional leadership which is much related to school managerial tasks and decision making within and outside the school context. For them, teacher leadership is formal terminology meant for highly experienced teachers with broad knowledge related to instructional and pedagogical tasks.

In their study in a Midwestern state, Arkert and Martin (2012) contended that teachers lack knowledge and understanding of their role as teacher leaders compared to school heads who typically have higher expectations of teachers' role within the school leadership community. Based on their survey, teacher feedback has lower mean scores in several components related to the task of teacher leaders toward school managerial aspects such as decision making, school budgeting, promotional and retention policies, and selecting and evaluating teachers' performance. On the other hand, teachers scored higher in tasks related to job specifications such as managing students' behaviours, shaping the curriculum, and choosing instruction and textbooks. Thus, it is critically argued that teachers' understanding and perceptions of the concept of teacher leadership is still limited and compartmentalised within their tasks and routines as educators. In addition to the issue, Uribe-Flórez, Al-Rawashdeh, and Morales (2014) revealed that teachers usually perceive themselves not as school leaders with leadership defined as a formal individual assignation referring to the school head. They also concluded that teachers' perceptions of the concept of teacher leaders was impeded by their limited

perceptions that teacher leadership involved guiding, helping, and assessing their fellow teachers on the subject content and pedagogical aspects.

From the perspective of Canadian teachers in Saskatchewan, Lee (2013) concluded that both novice and experienced teachers believed that teacher leadership is a label meant to experienced teachers who are expert within their subjects and constantly shared their skills and knowledge with other teachers. She concluded that teachers showed their willingness to participate as teacher leaders based on enhancement of a collaborative sharing and professional learning culture and flattened bureaucratic structure within the school context. Through a comparative case study approach, Curci (2012) posited that teachers are still surrounded with the traditional approach of teacher leaders since they still believe that leadership is structured within the school formal position. In Nigeria, Olujuwon and Perumal (2014) conducted a qualitative study to investigate Nigerian secondary school teachers' perceptions on teacher leadership. They concluded that formal positions of leadership within the school compound was considered since some teachers were perceived to be unprepared to provide leadership to their colleagues. In Iran, Aliakbari and Sadeghi (2014) investigated the practice of teacher leadership which is considered as an option for Iranian school reform and improvement. The findings revealed that teachers often participate in the school's decision making process and they also reflected that they were recognised for their professional roles by other school communities which affected their work performance. On the other hand, teachers also expressed that they were least supported to provide changes in the school curriculum and in creating the school's vision. Furthermore, Kale and Ozdelen' (2014) study, which also looked at the leadership style among teacher leaders, revealed that teachers from Turkish schools used a democratic style of leadership when they exceeded 10 years experience as teacher leaders compared to the teacher leaders who have less than 10 years who often adopt an authoritative and traditional style of leadership. Thus teachers from various educational contexts have multiple understandings and perceptions towards the concept of teacher leadership since some still believe that teacher leadership refers to teachers who hold formal leadership posts within the school context.

Teachers' readiness to teacher leadership

In order to ensure the effectiveness of teacher leadership, formal and informal teacher readiness to be teacher leaders plays an essential role. According to Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009), experienced teachers with high teaching skills and knowledge, are recognised and respected by their fellow teachers, and are highly passionate about their students' achievements are often selected as teacher leaders. They believed that teachers who met these standards were ready to be selected as teacher leaders. Further, De Villiers (2010) believed that measuring teacher readiness for teacher leadership can be identified based on teachers own attitudes, values, and beliefs in relation to teacher leadership together with their experiences as teachers, credibility, and approachability with other fellow teachers.

Studies on various categories of teachers (veteran, middle and novice educators) working in two major districts (Eden and Central Karoo in South Africa) showed that 96.43 per cent of teachers are significantly ready for teacher leadership and disregarded their experience and gender (De Villiers, 2010; De Villiers & Pretorius, 2011). Based on the quantitative findings, 81 per cent of teachers from the two major districts believed that experienced and skilled teachers were vital descriptors for holding the roles as teacher leaders whether it is designated formally or informally. Triska's (2007) study also revealed that among the factors contribute to the teacher readiness to be appointed as teacher leaders are having high motivation and job satisfaction with active involvement in decision making. Another factor emerged is teachers' maturity and their internalisation of educational philosophy and having passion towards adult development (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001). In addition, Silins and Mulford (2004) believed that teachers' acceptance of their schools' cultural climate and leadership style of heads highly influenced teacher readiness to be teacher leaders. As such, Mulford and Silins (2003) stressed that the school leadership placed a vital element in determining teacher acceptance and readiness to hold the teacher leader position. Researchers (Triska, 2007; Smylie, Conley, & Marks, 2002) also believed that significant factors such as schools' open climate, collaborative decision making, and openly discussing opinions with teachers enhance the practice of teacher leadership in schools.

In urban schools in the United States, a qualitative study by Snell and Swanson (2000) suggested that experienced teachers were ready to play the roles as teacher leaders if they were well accepted by their fellow teachers. Acceptance and recognition were placed on teachers who have high instructional and pedagogical skills, manage to collaborate with other teachers, and are empowered by their school heads. With these factors that support teachers' leadership role, teachers are able to mentor and expand their roles as leaders not only within their schools but beyond the school boundaries.

Challenges of teacher leadership

Previous researchers (DeHart, 2011; Harris & Muijs, 2004; Sanocki, 2013; Taylor, Goeke, Klein, Onore, & Geist, 2011) pointed out that even though teacher leadership has many advantages, it also has barriers requiring solutions. Harris and Muijs (2004) disclosed two main barriers faced by school leaders in practising teacher leadership; organisational and professional barriers while DeHart (2011) divided barriers into personal, relational, and structural barriers. The structural barrier is a replacement for the term organisational barrier mentioned by Harris and Muijs (2004). Barth (2001) listed too many responsibilities as teachers, little time provided for leadership activities for teachers, disapproval from fellow teachers and school administrators, and worries over the students' performance on standardised tests as impediments to assuming teacher leadership roles. In order to achieve the effective execution of teacher leadership, teacher leadership researchers (Greenwood, 2011; Johnson & Donaldson, 2007) noted that strong support from the school administrators would be able to overcome the relevant barriers and promote egalitarianism in the school culture.

Given the structural and organisational barriers, Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) stressed that the biggest barrier to teacher leadership is the traditional top-down leadership structure that still dominates many schools. As such, teacher leadership in any school depends on whether the senior management team within the school relinquishes real power to teachers and the extent to which teachers accept the influence of colleagues who have been appointed as leaders (Little, 1988). Furthermore, Timperley (2005) noted that a caution is required concerning the potential difficulties involved in executing teacher leadership since teachers as leaders may be particularly vulnerable to being openly disrespected and disregarded because they do not carry formal authority. In debating this issue, researchers on teacher leadership (Murphy, 2007; Smyser, 1995) believed that highly bureaucratic and hierarchical schools in terms of power and authority deny teachers' roles as leaders. It also discourages teachers from holding any administrative and leadership positions. In supporting this argument, Snell and Swanson (2000) emphasised that the collaborative culture within school culture and climate also functions as a significant influencing factor for effective teacher leadership practices within the school context. Thus, Smylie et al. (2002) summarised that organisational factors such as positive school culture that supports relationship between teachers, teacher leaders, and school administrators and teacher own norms and values influence effective teacher leadership practice.

In terms of teachers' professional culture, another barrier is that teachers as leaders are peers with no authority over other teachers (Harris & Muijs, 2005). Although formal positions are not necessary to influence others (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001), teacher leaders sometimes find themselves less connected to their peers when engaging in teacher leadership activities. Teachers also show their refusal in taking up leadership responsibilities when the leadership roles are not well-defined (Harris & Muijs, 2005), especially within a teacher culture that does not easily acknowledge that a colleague may have knowledge to share (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001). This poses a challenge to teacher leaders who want to collaborate with other teachers towards achieving the goal of improved practice. Time factor is another impediment to assuming teacher leadership roles and taking up teacher leadership tasks. Teacher leadership tasks are as diverse as teacher leadership roles (Harris & Muijs, 2005). Teacher leaders may be involved in administrative work, serve as liaison between administrators and teachers, or help peers to improve teaching. With a broader scope of responsibilities, there is a possibility that

teachers may resist moving beyond the classroom into leadership and management (Carter, Macdonald, & Martin, 2006) as it requires a high level of energy and time (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001). Researchers (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Odell, 1997) also argued that teaching is a profession that emphasises on teaching and teachers were trained to follow any order or norms related to the school operation. Indeed, appointed teachers experience additional burden since they are left untrained and require changing their attitudes since leadership requires a range of changes in teachers' values and belief system. Teachers also believe that having leadership responsibilities alongside their teaching loads will certainly increase their workload since they hold the belief that teachers should focus on classroom instruction and teaching for students' academic performance (Murphy, 2007; Little, 1988).

Furthermore, lack of time for collaboration, learning, leading, heavy workloads, teachers' own belief system that most of their time should be devoted to teaching and instructional tasks impede the development of teachers as leaders (Phillips, 2004; Smith, 2007; Tian, 2011; Torrance, 2012; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Finally, Greenwood (2011) revealed that lack of time to plan and assist fellow teachers was noted as the main barrier on teacher leadership practices. Teachers in his study reflected that asking fellow teachers to change, experiment, and innovate was considered difficult for them to implement. In addition, Torrance (2012) argued that the creation of teacher leaders within the school context was mainly on an informal basis, therefore some teachers believed that without any formal appointment as a teacher leader, it is an issue and barrier for teachers' unwillingness to be teacher leaders. In this sense, teachers should recognise that a broader role of teacher leadership is available to those who wish to assume the responsibilities (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001). However, granting greater autonomy to teachers with little expertise and commitment leads to more harmful practices than effective ones. Therefore, teacher empowerment should only occur through knowledge as teacher expertise is what establishes credibility with peers (Angelle & DeHart, 2010).

Teacher leadership in Malaysia

In Malaysia, the concept of teacher leadership is relatively new, unexplained, and still in its infancy stage. Teacher leadership requires studies to explore in-depth the execution of its concept within the Malaysian local settings. Teacher leadership requires the exploitation and examination of many elements to clearly elaborate its execution and practices through the lense of the Malaysian education system. As highlighted, researchers in teacher leadership, Yuet, Yusof, and Mohamad (2014) believed that further refinement and exploration of teacher leadership within the Malaysian schooling system would help accumulate the latest information on teacher leadership standards within the Malaysian school settings.

In tandem with the belief that sharing leadership is required for school leadership effectiveness, the second phase of the National Educational Blueprint from 2013 to 2025 was introduced by the Ministry of Education to enforce the execution of distributed leadership with the objective to strengthen school leadership capabilities. Teacher leadership certainly emerges alongside instructional leadership in producing a high quality educational system. In 2009, the Ministry of Education launched the Malaysian Teacher Standard framework which is typically a visionary statement of skills and knowledge, teaching competencies, and dispositions required by future teachers in preparing them to be educators for the next generation of students. In the standard framework, several elements were purposely stated in order to support the process of producing quality teachers such as teachers' selections, assessment procedures, training, facilities, and collaboration. The standards focused by the framework involve teachers' professionalism practices (self, profession and social domains), knowledge (ICT, philosophy on curriculum and implementation, assessments, students' development, subject's contents), and the last element is skills in teaching and learning which focuses on teaching and learning, assessment, planning, and classroom management skills (Idris & Hamzah, 2013). The introduction of the framework provides better opportunities for teachers and middle layer school administrators to

form a leadership pool that supports the overall school improvement plan which also emphasises on teacher quality and knowledge beyond their subject matters and instruction (Ahmad Zabidi, 2013). Therefore, the leadership system within the future Malaysian school system involves all individuals within the school compound including the subject heads and assistant heads (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012). In this sense, Abdullah Sani, Abdul Rashid, and Abdul Ghani (2007) contended that the implementation of teacher leadership within Malaysian schools has much potential since it integrates teachers' wider roles in the school community, inculcates teachers' collegiality and high commitment, as well as a sense of belonging. In addition, they believe that through the collaborative and sharing leadership, school workloads could be shared to foster an open communication within the school culture for enhanced school improvement programmes. A study by Ahmad Zabidi (2013) on Malaysian teacher resilience also exposed that teacher collegiality provides support and motivation to other teachers through regular formal or informal discussions in facing the challenges and issues regarding school performance and discipline. This demonstrates that teacher leadership provides a much bigger platform for teachers to support other teachers in facing stress, extra workload, and students' disciplinary issues.

In recent years, the Ministry of Education in Malaysia has launched significant efforts to initiate leadership within teacher education preparation programmes for pre-service teachers. This is essential for the process of teacher development (Jamil, Razak, Raju, & Mohamed, 2011). In inculcating leadership as part of knowledge and disposition among pre-service teachers, leadership themes were impeccably intertwined alongside teachers' professionalism courses, and subjects for pre-service teachers offered by faculties of education in Malaysian public universities, teacher education institutions and colleges in Malaysia. Teacher leadership researchers (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Murphy, 2007; Nudrat & Akhtar, 2014; Smyser, 1995) called for instilling leadership within teacher education preparation programmes as an early preparation for teachers to hold and be responsible for any leadership posts and tasks in the future. Thus, the ministry introduced leadership as a subject for pre-service teachers within the curriculum of teacher colleges in preparing pre-service teachers to be credible leaders not only among students, but also to their fellow teachers. However, the emphasis of teachers as leaders or the teacher leadership concept within the pre-service teacher curriculum offered by public universities is only through subjects 'learning management' or teacher's professionalism (Esah, 2003).

Even though teacher leadership is considered to be a new practical concept which focuses on strengthening teachers' role within the Malaysian educational framework, few studies explored the relevance of the concept within the local setting. For example, Tang (2011) studied the implementation of teacher leadership between Malaysia and China and believed that much more attention should be rendered to understanding the framework since it is in its infancy stage. Admittedly, not many studies have been conducted that examine the role of teachers as leaders and the concept of teacher leadership. Lee (2014) investigated how distributed leadership practices in high performing schools produces teachers as leaders. She contended that the practice of distributed leadership acknowledges the importance of involving teachers in leading and managing the school. At the same time, heads should also try to ensure that teachers were prepared for challenges in their leadership roles by creating a supportive environment. Heads should provide structured opportunities for teachers to develop their roles as leaders through developmental programmes and activities that covered professional development, professional learning, and decision making. Recognising the notion that teacher leadership is constituted through the interaction of leaders, teachers, and instructional practice (Spillane et al., 2004), there is a need to determine how school teachers (referring to in-service teachers in Malaysia) know about teachers as leaders, how ready they are to be teacher leaders, and explore challenges when practising teacher leadership in their schools.

Method

This study employs a mixed-methods approach of sequential explanatory design in answering the foregoing three research questions. According to Clark and Creswell (2015) the sequential explanatory design begins with the numerical data collection through questionnaire distribution followed by qualitative interview data to support the quantitative data. The reason of having two stands within the study was based on the assumption that data enrichment occurs in understanding practices of teacher leadership within school contexts (Clark & Creswell, 2015).

Sampling

The participants in this study were 780 in-service teachers comprised 591 in-service teachers from primary and another 189 in-service teachers from secondary from 40 schools during 2015 academic year. Since the practice of teacher leadership involves seniors and more experienced teachers, only in-service teachers with more than five years' experience and categorised as 'mid-year teachers' based on the teacher professional classification by Day et al. (2007) were randomly selected for their reflections. The rationale of choosing 'mid-year' teachers as a sample was based on the assumption that they are qualified to be appointed as teacher leaders. Senior teachers were not selected as the sample study since most hold formal school leadership posts while novice teachers were unsuitable respondents due to lack of experience, knowledge, and skills. Before proceeding with data collection, permission was granted from the state department of education to secure high participation from teachers. With the assistance provided, the response rate was more than 95 per cent.

After analysing the overall in-service teachers' response, the data collection processes were continued with interviews with ten in-service teachers from primary and secondary schools. The ten in-service teachers were selected from those with more than six years' experience as teachers who have the possibility to be selected as teacher leaders. The reason for selecting 10 in-service teachers as subjects for the interview was to obtain more insights, reflections, and in-depth explanations. In protecting their identities, all 10 teachers were kept anonymous and labelled as Teachers 1 to 10.

Instrumentation

The instrument for this study consists of three sections. The first section contains four demographic variables: gender, years of service as a teacher, school type, and teacher's knowledge of teacher leadership.

The second section was the teachers' readiness scale which comprised self-developed items and a few items which were adopted from teacher leadership readiness scale by Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001, 2009). A total of 12 items was developed using positive statements through Likert's four rating scales: 1= strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; and 4 = strongly agree. The final section asked teachers to select the relevant parties that might present challenges to in-service teachers when implementing teacher leadership which were: (a) their headteachers, (b) other fellow teachers, and (c) novice teachers. In this section, teachers were asked to choose only one group that might slow down the practice of teacher leadership within their school setting.

In answering the first and third research questions, we employed a series of interviews with selected in-service teachers to investigate their knowledge, understanding, and challenges that they faced while implementing teacher leadership. An interview protocol was developed to guide the researchers to obtain in-depth knowledge related to in-service teachers' readiness to be teacher leaders, their perception on the concept of teacher leaders, and challenges they face when appointed as teacher leaders. In answering research question 1, in-service teachers were asked relevant questions related to their understanding on the concept of teacher leadership. In exploring challenges that in-service teachers face while executing teacher leadership practices, some interview items were developed to guide researchers to discover in-service teachers' complications in practising the role of teacher leaders.

Since teachers' responses involved the identification of relevant parties, in-service teachers' identities were kept anonymous based on ethical consent. Also, all interviewed in-service teachers were fully informed about the purpose of the study and procedures involved, signed a consent form and assured of the utmost confidentiality before being interviewed.

Translating and items' piloting process: Since most of the in-service teachers were locally educated using the national language, all items were fully translated into Malay. In order to ensure the precision of meaning from English to Malay, a rigorous translation process was employed that involved the forward and backward process of translation (Brislin, Lonner, & Thorndike, 1973; Sperber, DeVellis, & Boehlecke, 1994) by two translators. A Malay language expert and few teachers were approached to ensure the precision of the Malay language items including the sentence structure, and meaning. Items were then translated into English using a backward approach with the help of language experts. Items were then checked by assigned teachers to determine the precision of the meaning, sentence structure, and its relevance to the Malaysian educational system. After stringent evaluations, few suggestions were forwarded and changes were made in accordance with the recommendations.

A pilot test was carried out to test the validity and reliability of the instrument. For this reason, the instrument was distributed to 130 in-service teachers who were excluded from the main sample of this study. The calculated coefficient of internal consistency was 0.929. This indicates strong internal consistency of the instrument. As for the qualitative pilot data collection, we conducted interviews with two in-service teachers to assess whether the interview protocol items could be easily understood by the in-service teachers. Based on the results, some items were deleted.

Data collection and analysis

In answering research question 1, descriptive statistics comprising mean scores and frequencies were employed to determine in-service teachers' understanding and knowledge related to the concept of teacher leadership. Eight teachers were purposely selected and interviewed to understand in-service teachers' understanding and perceptions on teacher leadership. As for research question 2, data were obtained from in-service teachers' feedback regarding their readiness to practise teacher leadership through questionnaire distributed to 780 in-service teachers. Data were analysed descriptively (i.e., they were ranked from the most-frequently used to the least-frequently used strategies) before proceeding with the interview data. Following the findings from the descriptive statistics, two series of interviews were organised with 10 in-service teachers. The sessions lasted approximately two hours. Only interview data was used in answering question three. Furthermore, in-service teachers were then asked to choose three people in their school which have the potential to slow down the implementation of teacher leadership listed as: (a) headteachers, (b) novice teachers, and (c) fellow teachers. This was followed by interviews about the challenges that they faced while implementing teacher leadership.

In securing the trustworthiness of the interview data, two important measures were used. First, undertaking inter-reliability tests where two evaluators assessed the transcripts and later coded at 0.72 through Cohen's Kappa agreements. Second, re-visiting in-service teachers for the agreement on the data accuracy.

Results

Table 1 below describes in-service teachers' perceptions of teacher leadership. Female teachers were the majority that participated in this study with 404 in-service teachers from primary and 136 from secondary schools. A total of 240 male teachers consisted of 53 secondary school and 187 primary school teachers. As for the school type, Grade A school teachers were the most dominant number with 365 (primary) and 128 (secondary) teachers reflecting on the concept of teacher leadership. Another 143 teachers (primary) and 43 teachers (secondary) responded to the survey instrument. Only 22 teachers from schools categorised as high performing and only one teacher from the cluster type of school responded to the instrument. While primary schools with least student revealed participation of 60 teachers and with only 18 teachers from the secondary level. Based on teachers' experiences, a balanced number between primary and secondary teachers were obtained with 387 teachers having six to ten years' experience and a total number of 392 teachers with experience of more than 11 years as in-service teachers.

Table 1. In-service teacher's demographic profiles

Demographic criteria	Primary teachers		Secondary teachers	
	n	Percent	n	Percent
<i>Gender</i>				
Male	187	31.6	53	28.0
Female	404	68.4	136	72.0
<i>School types</i>				
Grade A	365	61.8	128	67.7
Grade B	143	24.2	43	22.8
Schools with least students (SLS)	60	10.2	18	9.5
High performing	22	3.7		
Cluster	1	0.2		
<i>Experiences</i>				
Six to ten years	295	49.9	92	48.7
More than 11 years	296	50.1	96	50.8
Total	587	100,0	189	100,0

Note: Grade A schools have more than 2000 students; Grade B schools have less than 2000 students; SLS schools have students less than 50 students.

Reliability and validity of in-service teachers' readiness scale

We performed exploratory factor analyses with the principal component method and varimax with Kaiser Normalization rotation procedure for data analysis. As for both groups of teachers, Kaiser Meyer Olkin's measure for sample adequacy reported 0.920 value while Bartlett's test was $\chi^2 (3986) = 6.024, p < .05$. Two factors were extracted in which items 1-7 clustered under the first factor labelled as personal readiness to be teacher leader (0.718 to 0.818) and another cluster group of items from items 8 to 12 labelled as professional readiness to be teacher leaders (0.612 to 0.818). The total variance accounted for was 68.905% of variability in the 12 items. The communalities values (h^2) reported were consistent with high values ranging from 0.615 to 0.787 which is considered as having high discriminant validity. The internal consistency for the items was also measured using Cronbach's alpha with a value of 0.942. Table 2 reports the details.

Table 2. Factorial loading, internal consistency, and means for teacher leadership readiness scale

Item Statement	alpha values ($\alpha = 0.942$)	Factor loadings		Mean	h^2
		Factor 1 (Personal)	Factor 2 (professional)		
1 I am ready to assist my fellow teachers	0.938	0.780		3.53	0.681
2 I am ready to share my knowledge with other teachers	0.938	0.767		3.52	0.736
3 I am ready to welcome any criticism related to my teaching by my senior friends.	0.938	0.752		3.34	0.663
4 I am ready to be mentored by my seniors for improvement of my career paths	0.938	0.767		3.56	0.687
5 I am ready to participate because I know that through teacher leadership, my team will improve	0.938	0.758		3.58	0.677
6 I am ready to be mentored in order to obtain current knowledge	0.938	0.697		3.56	0.692
7 I am ready to be appointed as a leader among novice teachers	0.937	0.612		3.32	0.616
8 I am ready to participate because it is part of my responsibility	0.938		0.718	3.43	0.615
9 I am ready to participate because it closes the gap between teachers.	0.937		0.797	3.47	0.737
10 I am ready to participate because it improves relationship with my novices	0.937		0.818	3.44	0.767
11 My school practices collaborative work culture	0.936		0.817	3.49	0.767
12 I was assigned by my head teacher	0.937		0.748	3.52	0.688
Eiginvalues		7.709	1.248		
Percent of variance		59.303	9.602		

The results CFA revealed that loadings of teacher readiness factor exceeded the value of 0.50 ranging from 0.72 to 0.84 respectively. In addition, the fit indices indicated a good model fit; RFI 0.866, IFI 0.909, NFI=0.901, CFI=0.908, RMSEA 0.07 and $\chi^2/df=1.330$. We also tested the psychometric elements which consist of the discriminant and convergent validity of the model. For testing the discriminant validity, we used correlation matrix which indicated a significant correlational value ($r = 0.78$; $p < 0.05$) between the two constructs. In supporting this measurement, Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson (2010) argued that correlational values below 0.90 implied that the studied constructs were unique and unrelated to each other which indicated no indication of collinearity. The data also showed that the composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) values for personally ready was 0.87 and the AVE was 0.67 while for professionally ready, the CR value was 0.79 and the AVE was 0.82. Both AVE values for the two factors were greater than 0.50 suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981) and CR values were greater than the 0.7 suggested by Hair et al. (2010). Therefore, it is assumed that the measurement model has demonstrated a good model fit to form a good measurement model. Table 3 presents details.

Table 3. Results of CFA, AVE, CR and internal consistency

Item's code	Item	Factor loading	SE	Squared multiple correlations	AVE	CR	α
	<i>Personally ready</i>				0.67	0.87	0.947
Item1	Assist my fellow teachers	0.75	0.25	0.57			
Item2	Share my knowledge with other teachers	0.81	0.25	0.65			
Item3	Welcome any criticism related to my teaching by my senior friends	0.74	0.27	0.54			
Item4	Mentored by my seniors for improvement of my career paths	0.76	0.28	0.58			
Item5	My team will improve	0.79	0.25	0.63			
Item6	Obtained current knowledge	0.82	0.24	0.66			
Item7	Appoint as leader among novice teachers	0.78	0.24	0.60			
	<i>Professionally ready</i>				0.79	0.82	0.931
Item8	It is part of my responsibility	0.75	0.26	0.57			
Item9	Closes the gap between teachers.	0.85	0.24	0.72			
Item10	Improve relationship with my novices	0.86	0.24	0.73			
Item11	Collaborative work culture	0.80	0.24	0.64			
Item12	Assigned by my head teacher	0.73	0.24	0.54			

Fit indices: $\chi^2=555.160$; $df=49$; $\chi^2/df=1.330$; RFI=0.866; IFI=0.909; NFI=0.901; CFI=0.908; RMSEA=0.07

Knowledge, understanding, and perceptions of teacher leadership

Table 4 shows the classifications of in-service teachers related to knowledge and understanding of teacher leadership. We segregated their feedback into 'heard of the concept' and 'never heard of the concept'. Based on responses provided by 189 secondary teachers, 181 teachers admitted that they came across this concept and another eight teachers honestly confessed that they had never heard of the concept. As for primary teachers, 569 teachers declared that they have heard of teacher leadership concept and another 11 teachers admitted that they had never heard of the concept. Therefore, we assumed that in-service teachers whether from primary and secondary schools knew the concept of teacher leadership. We then categorised in-service teachers into (a) little knowledge, (b) developing, and (c) extensive knowledge of teacher leadership. From a total of 181 secondary teachers who admitted that they know about it, only 12 in-service confessed that they know a little about it, 100 in-service teachers admitted that they are in the process of understanding it and another 77 in-service teachers mentioned that they extensively know about it. On the other hand, a total number of 210 in-service teachers from primary schools believed that they know a little about it, 281 in-service teachers confessed

that they are self-developing the concept, and lastly 78 in-service teachers from primary schools extensively know about it. The analysis indicated that most in-service teachers whether from primary or secondary schools they are at the phase of developing their knowledge and understanding teacher leadership through various approaches such as academic courses, seminars, conferences, and postgraduate courses.

Table 4. Understanding, knowledge, and perceptions about teacher leadership

Knowing categories	Secondary (n- 189 teachers)		Primary (587 teachers)	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Heard of teacher leadership concept	181 teachers (96.7 %)	8 teachers (4.4 %)	569 teachers (96.9 %)	11 teachers (1.9 %)
Knowledge classifications	Secondary (n-181 teachers)		Primary (n-569 teachers)	
Little	12 (6.6 %)		210 (36.9 %)	
Developing	100 (55 %)		281 (49 %)	
Extensive	77 (42 %)		78 (13.7 %)	

In order to explore in-service teachers' understanding of teacher leadership, interviews were conducted with selected teachers to determine whether in-service teachers from both levels of schooling have the same definition of teacher leadership practices. To this end, we interviewed in-service teachers from primary and secondary schools to obtain their standpoints. From the interviews, most of the teachers provided positive responses that teacher leadership is a process whereby experienced teachers provide assistance, mentoring, and help novice teachers to improve their skills. One primary teacher explained:

For me, teacher leadership is a process when senior and experienced teachers were selected as leaders to other teachers and they use their skills in leading through helping approach, especially for teaching and learning purposes and solving problems exist among novice teachers.

Another secondary teacher provided an answer which is not only limited to the definition of teacher leadership but the significance criteria to be selected as teacher leaders. She elaborated:

Admittedly, I have limited understanding about teacher leadership but based on my understanding, a teacher leader is a person who has wide experience in teaching and learning, possess knowledge and skills on the relevant subject she/he teaches and is being a formal reference for other teachers whether in academic/extra-curricular activities and able to handle his/her subject department. Thus, I need to improve my knowledge if I am selected as an informal teacher leader.

A teacher from primary school also provided a clear definition based on his understanding of teacher leadership. His definition of teacher leadership is clearly based on the willingness of some experienced and senior teachers in strengthening the knowledge of novice teachers who are considered new and lack skills:

From my standpoint, teacher leadership is an approach between senior teachers with novice teachers to improve novice teachers for the overall school improvement and excellence. Senior teachers have wide experience, ideas, and knowledge compared to other teachers. They have wide experience as educators which should be put to use in the school improvement process. Otherwise, their knowledge as educators is not used for the school's benefit.

Based on the interview findings, we assumed that teachers from the primary and secondary levels share similar thoughts and notions on the concept of teacher leadership. Therefore, we assume that teacher leadership is not a new concept to them. In addition, we asked in-service teachers whether they think the implementation of teacher leadership provides benefits to them and to their schools. Undeniably, primary in-service teachers pointed out that the concept of teacher leadership provides many benefits to their professional working lives as teachers since teacher leadership fosters a

collaborative and cooperative culture among teachers within the school context. One primary teacher elaborated:

Yes, teacher leadership definitely helps teachers grow in terms of knowledge and skills. With the implementation of teacher leadership within any school, senior teachers can provide support to novice teachers complete professional tasks and meet requirements as teachers.

In dealing with teacher leadership implication on school improvement, secondary in-service teachers gave identical answers with primary in-service teachers. During interviews, secondary in-service teachers believed that teacher leadership is a suitable platform for teachers to help and support their novice counterparts in improving their teaching and learning abilities. At the same time, teacher leadership can also be used as a platform for teachers sharing knowledge session which can later strengthen teachers' teamwork and collaborative culture. An informant is convinced and stressed:

I find many positive implications of teacher leadership for us as teachers. Through this approach, we can help and support our novice colleagues in improving their teaching capabilities. I also think, it provides us with an affirmative platform for knowledge sharing among teachers in exchanging ideas.

Teachers' readiness to be teacher leaders

In measuring teacher readiness to participate in teacher leadership, 591 teachers from primary school and 189 teachers from secondary were given a 12-item survey to determine their readiness to practise teacher leadership. We also interviewed 10 in-service teachers to explore their readiness to implement teacher leadership within their school compound.

Table 5 presents the results of descriptive analysis through frequency, percentage, and mean scores for each item. Based on Table 5, all mean scores were high ranging from 3.36 to 3.57 (primary teachers) and 3.21 to 3.79 (secondary teachers). From the high mean values for both categories of teachers, we conclude that both groups of teachers are ready to be selected as teacher leaders formally or informally. Item eight has the lowest mean values (mean - 3.36- primary; 3.21 – secondary) revealing that most in-service teachers are quite reluctant to be labelled as leaders by novice teachers. Thus, we assumed that in-service teachers believed that they were not ready to be teacher leaders for their novice counterparts since they believed that they still lack knowledge and experience. On the other hand, item two had the highest mean value of 3.57 (primary) and 3.79 (secondary), suggesting senior teachers were willing to share their knowledge and experience with their novice colleagues.

As for measuring differences in terms of teacher readiness from teachers' professional and personal readiness using the *t*-test analyses, the results revealed that differences in primary teachers' demographics were mostly based on their personal readiness compared to their professional readiness. Table 6 depicts that significant differences of primary teachers were through their gender ($F= 3.48; p = 0.02; p<0.05$) and their school grades ($F= 8.33; p = 0.00; p<0.05$). On the other hand, secondary teachers indicated differences based on their school grades in both personal readiness ($F= 61.3; p = 0.01; p<0.05$) and their professional readiness ($F= 7.39; p = 0.00; p<0.05$). Therefore, we assumed that teacher readiness in terms of personal and professional readiness were mainly through their school grades which indicate schools which have a larger number of teachers were mainly ready to be selected as teacher leaders compared to schools with a smaller number of teachers.

Following the quantitative responses provided by in-service teachers, we also conducted a series of interviews to explore their readiness and willingness to be teacher leaders. From the interviews, most of the in-service teachers are willing to be teacher leaders if they were selected by their school heads. During the interviews, in-service teachers mentioned that being selected as a teacher leader is formal recognition by the school's administration authorities of their capabilities. Therefore, they believed that it is unwise for them to show unwillingness in accepting the formal recognition. Teacher 2 believed that if she was assigned by her school head to hold a position as a teacher leader, she would

definitely accept the recognition which demonstrates the school head's trust in her knowledge and skills. She elaborated:

If I were appointed as teacher leader with the purpose of helping novice teachers, I will try to do my best since it will certainly be a platform for me and other teachers to share our knowledge and experience. The ultimate objective is students' achievements and achieving a collaborative culture among teachers.

In-service teachers from both types of schools believed that through the implementation of teacher leadership, they share their knowledge and skills for the benefit of the school development, because they believe the execution provides a positive platform for them to share instructional knowledge that benefits the overall school performance. Even though most of the interviewed novice teachers are willing to be teacher leaders if selected, some modestly mentioned that they were unqualified candidates due to lack of experience and knowledge. One secondary male in-service teacher explained:

To be a teacher leader, I certainly accept the appointment if I am meant to be a leader among my fellow teachers. I am a bit reluctant to guide novice teachers since I believe that senior teachers who have experience of more than 10 years teaching are better suited to guide novice teachers.

Challenges for teacher leadership execution

The results revealed that in-service teachers selected their headteachers as potential challenges (N = 228; 38.5 per cent) primary (N=87; 46 per cent) secondary, followed by their fellow teacher teachers (N=216; 36.5 per cent) primary (N=57; 30.2 per cent) secondary, then novice teachers with 124 in primary and 45 in-service teachers from secondary schools. Following the quantitative data, the study was supplemented by interviewing 10 in-service teachers who gave their reflections. The themes emerged from the interviews were teachers' own negative attitudes, the generation gap between teachers, lack of time and heavy workloads, low trust from school administrators and heads, and teachers' own lack of confidence to lead other colleagues. Tables 5, 6, and 7 depict the details.

Table 5. Descriptive findings of personnel who act as challenges to teacher leadership

Relevant personnel	School types			
	Primary		Secondary	
	F	%	F	%
Headteachers	228	38.5	87	46.0
Fellow teachers	216	36.5	57	30.2
Novice teachers	124	21.0	45	23.8
Total	591	100.0	189	100.0

Table 6. Frequencies and percentages of the in-service teachers’ readiness to be teacher leaders

Statement	Item No	Scale distributions														Primary Mean scores	Secondary Mean Scores		
		Strongly disagree				Disagree				Agree				Strongly agree					
		Prim.		Sec.		Prim.		Sec.		Prim.		Sec.		Prim.				Sec.	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%			F	%
to assist my fellow teachers	1	9	1.5			14	2.4			215	36.4	52	27.5	353	39.7	137	72.5	3.54	3.72
to share my knowledge with other teachers	2	7	1.2			12	2.0			209	35.4	39	20.6	363	61.4	150	79.4	3.57	3.79
to welcome any criticism related to my teaching by my senior friends	3	10	1.7			34	5.8	2	1.1	269	45.5	90	47.6	278	47.5	97	51.3	3.37	3.50
to be mentored by my seniors for improvement of my career paths	4	5	0.8			20	3.4	2	1.1	215	36.4	53	28.0	351	59.4	154	70.9	3.54	3.69
to participate because I know that through teacher leadership, my team will improve	5	2	0.3			18	3.0			247	41.8	53	28.0	324	54.8	136	72.0	3.51	3.71
to be mentored in order to obtain current knowledge	6	2	0.3			12	3.0	1	0.5	225	38.1	40	21.1	352	59.6	148	78.3	3.56	3.77
to be a leader among novice teachers	7	3	0.5	2	1.1	31	5.2	18	9.5	303	51.3	107	56.6	254	43.0	62	32.8	3.36	3.21
Total mean score for personal readiness																		3.52	3.62
to participate because it is part of my responsibility	8	2	0.3			17	2.9	1	0.5	269	45.5	103	54.5	303	51.3	85	45.0	3.47	3.44
to participate because it certainly closes the gap between teachers	9	3	0.5			23	3.9	2	1.1	257	43.5	91	48.1	308	52.1	96	50.8	3.47	3.49
Participate to improve my relationship with novices	10	2	0.3			27	4.6	4	2.1	266	45.0	92	48.7	296	50.1	93	49.2	3.44	3.47
My school practices collaborative work culture	11	3	0.5			21	3.6	2	1.1	256	43.3	73	38.6	311	52.6	114	60.3	3.48	3.59
I was assigned by my head teacher	12	4	0.7			28	4.7	2	1.1	273	46.2	92	48.7	286	48.4	95	50.3	3.42	3.49
Total mean score for professional readiness																		3.45	3.49

Note: Prim. - primary; Sec. – secondary; N= 591 primary teachers; 189 = secondary teachers

Table 7. Comparison of differences in secondary and primary teachers' readiness by demographics

Variables	Primary teachers							Secondary teachers						
	Professional				Personal			Professional				Personal		
	N	Mean square	F	Sig.	Mean square	F	Sig.	N	Mean square	F	Sig.	Mean square	F	Sig.
<i>Gender</i>														
Male	187	3.44	1.49	0.22	3.43	3.48	0.02*	53	3.43	1.76	0.18	3.64	0.68	0.41
Female	404	3.48			3.52			136	3.44			3.65		
<i>Experiences</i>														
6 to 10 years	295	3.42	1.18	0.22	3.45	0.25	0.61	92	3.41	1.51	0.22	3.61	0.43	0.51
11 years and more	296	3.51			3.52			96	3.46			3.67		
<i>School grades</i>														
Grade A schools	365	3.46	0.61	0.43	3.48	8.33	0.00*	128	3.45	6.13	0.01*	3.67	7.39	0.00*
Grade B schools	143	3.42			3.45			43	3.39			3.60		

Note: * significant at the 0.05 level.

Teachers' own negative attitudes

From the interviews, a primary school teacher revealed that they faced difficulties in implementing teacher leadership due to negative attitudes among teachers. She explained that some teachers have negative attitudes such as being unwilling to cooperate, have reverse opinions, being selfish and reluctant to receive extra workload. Some examples of negative attitudes represent challenge for the implementation of teacher leadership, which in fact, limits the collaborative efforts among teachers. He explains:

There are some teachers who do not cooperate with the teacher leader. Some of them have negative attitudes and show their unwillingness through giving excuses. In fact, some of them were absent during our informal discussion sessions since they have opposite opinions with our teacher leader. This teacher attitude is simply giving many problems to our teacher leaders.

Most interviewed in-service teachers revealed that they also face the same problems with teachers' negative attitudes of not providing any support when their help was required by the teacher leader. Some fellow teachers were against the objectives and vision of their own team since most have their own opinions and cannot accommodate criticism from the teacher leader.

In our school, there are some teachers who typically show disagreement with the views and opinions of others. For some teachers, they do not accept new ideas and criticism from teacher leaders. I think this happens due to different perspectives and educational background.

Teacher's generation gap

In discussing this challenge, a secondary school teacher with about seven years experiences as a teacher divulged that it is difficult for a teacher to be appointed as a teacher leader among senior colleagues if they do not have the passion to be a teacher leader. This typically happens because some senior teachers show their disinclination in following teacher leaders' instructions since they have more experience compared to appointed teachers. As a young teacher, he believed that it is quite demanding and difficult task to lead senior teachers. He briefly stated;

As for young teachers like me, I think it is difficult for me to lead those senior teachers. Some of them were reluctant to follow my instruction, advice, and opinion since most are more experienced.

Conversely, another teacher described the situation when he faced difficulties while leading fellow teachers, especially senior teachers. He explained that some of his colleagues do not have the confidence in his ability to lead due to his limited experience as a teacher. Therefore, he found it quite difficult for him to lead his team:

The biggest challenge that I faced was handling the senior teachers. Most of them are experienced and may have some negative thoughts about me. Some of them really have no confidence in my ability to lead the team. I think that to be a teacher leader, one should be a senior teacher because it is easier for other teachers who have less experience than them.

Lack of time and having extra workload

Primary school teachers are burdened with heavy workloads. As teachers find it difficult to play their roles as teacher leaders effectively. One secondary teacher stresses;

As a teacher, we have to attend classes, administrative workload, and extra-curricular activities. Therefore, we simply do not have ample time to handle any formal meeting or discussion which is related to team activities. If we have any reduction in our teaching workload, we can organise informal meetings relevant to our subjects.

In addition, some teachers felt that being a teacher leader, is a challenging situation since most have heavy teaching workloads and time constraints. Some revealed that being appointed as a teacher leader certainly increases their administrative workload. One primary teacher explained:

Issues and challenges that are faced are time constraints since we are rather given heavy teaching workloads and being appointed as a teacher leader definitely increases my workload. As a teacher, my priority will be my students' achievement.

Trust from school headteachers

The interview results revealed that some of the school heads were afraid of losing their power to fellow teachers even though some administrators were not content with their responsibilities as active agents for the school's change process. The informants stressed that execution of teacher leadership would be a failure if school administrations do not provide teacher leaders with psychological support such as motivation and assistance to make wise decisions. In fact, teacher leaders feel isolated since they do not have any reliable and experienced administrator to rely on. One teacher from primary school revealed her frustration:

As a teacher leader, for me, it is not an easy task if we have or face school administrators who are afraid of losing their power. Some of them believe that by having the teacher leader as the middle manager, they will have the least power in making decisions. If we face school administrators who are difficult to accept any change towards the school process, I do believe the concept of teacher leader would decrease in terms of participation. Teacher leaders lack support and have been executing the job on their own capacity without any assistance from the school administrators.

Adding to the above mentioned, another secondary school teacher with a cynical expression exposed that their school head is one of the main barriers. He further explained that some of the heads prefer their own decisions without considering views from teachers or the school leadership board. He added that some heads insist that everything should accord to his or her liking and like to intervene when everything is not based on their specifications. He clarified his frustration:

Some school heads do not accept any decision that is made by teachers. They want everything to be totally based on their preferences and would interfere with any decision that was made by teachers. Therefore, teachers feel frustrated and do not want to make any decision since they know that the heads make decisions based on their preferences without compromising with the teachers' decision.

Lack of confidence to lead other colleagues

For in-service teachers who are reluctant to be appointed as teacher leaders, they revealed that they have little confidence to lead their own colleagues. However, in-service teachers leading fellow teachers with wide experiences proved to be a challenging task to be fulfilled. Teachers who showed unwillingness in leading their colleagues believed that they required more experience and knowledge. One teacher revealed her reluctance to lead other teachers:

My greatest fear is to lead my fellow colleagues. I always consider myself a junior compared to my senior fellows. Certainly, I would have difficulties if I were appointed as teacher leader.

Discussion

This study investigates teachers' understanding and perception of the concept of teacher leadership, teachers' readiness to be informal leaders, whether through their personal or professional aspects, and challenges teachers encounter in executing teacher leadership. This study provides significant results through empirical and naturalistic approaches related to teachers' perceptions and understanding towards teacher leadership practices of whether in-service teachers are ready to be given the role as teacher leaders.

In-service teachers' perceptions and understanding of teacher leader

The study explored the aspects of teachers' understanding on teacher leadership through both strands, which concluded that most teachers have considerable understanding of the concept of teacher leadership. This is based on more than 90 per cent teachers' feedback which suggested that they knew

the concept very well. The results also showed that most in-service teachers were at the stage of developing their understanding of teacher leadership and some teachers provided feedback that they were intensively exploring the concept of teacher leadership through seminars, conferences, and postgraduate courses. In-service teachers confessed that they have limited understanding of teacher leadership and some of them responded that they needed to increase their knowledge on how to implement the teacher leaders' role in helping and conveying knowledge to fellow teachers.

The results reached the conclusion that teachers knew the concept of teacher leadership through oral communication with their senior and colleagues or through discussions, workshops, and seminars. In-service teachers also perceived teacher leadership as a positive culture that enhances teachers' teamwork, easier collaboration with fellow friends, being coached and mentored by their colleagues and building an open relationship between senior in-service teachers with their novice counterparts. They believed that through teacher leadership practices, schools will have more positive and open school culture that enhances collegiality among them since teachers are deemed to have very limited interaction with their headteachers compared to fellow teachers. Therefore, it is assumed that Malaysian in-service teachers knew much and have positive remarks on teacher leadership since it is theoretically provides closer relationships among teachers within the school. This finding is congruent with Phelps (2008) and Salahuddin (2010) where lack of understanding of teacher leadership became the 'stumbling block' for effective practice of teacher leadership. Thus, if teachers only have a vague understanding of the concept of teacher leadership, it would definitely lead to failure since teachers are not really sure of the goals and objectives behind the implementation of the concept.

Furthermore, responses of in-service teachers indicated that the implementation of teacher leadership has constructive implications on their professional lives as it reduces segregation among teachers. In-service teachers believed that teacher leadership is an accommodating platform that helps other teachers grow and improve their skills and disposition to be effective teachers. This strengthens teachers' relationships since they have much time to interact and discuss problems, exchange ideas, and knowledge. Most teachers also believed that teacher leadership exhibits effects on school improvement process. This finding is consistent with Fairman and Mackenzie (2015) who called for teacher leadership implementation in helping, communicating, and having strong teamwork that is relevant to the school's positive and open culture between teachers. In this sense, in-service teachers believed that through teacher leadership practices, teacher leaders informally share their skills and knowledge (Lee, 2013) and coach novice teachers. This contradicted the findings from Uribe-Flórez et al. (2014)'s study which posited teachers have limited knowledge about teacher leadership where leadership always refers to holding formal position where leadership is restricted to the classroom setting (Grant et al., 2010).

In-service teachers' readiness to be teacher leaders

The results indicated that both in-service teachers were ready to be nominated as teacher leaders. Secondary in-service teachers have much higher personal readiness compared to their counterparts from primary schools. Based on professional readiness, in-service teachers from secondary schools were noted to be slightly higher in terms of readiness. Therefore, we assumed that both in-service teachers regardless of school levels are ready to be selected as teacher leaders. The results also showed that both in-service primary and secondary teachers were ready to be selected as teacher leaders because they knew that through teacher leadership practices, they can share and exchange their knowledge for the betterment of their schools. This finding concurred with De Villiers (2010) that teacher readiness is an essential element which determines the effectiveness of teacher leadership accomplishment. Through teacher leadership, teachers mentor, coach, and guide their novice colleagues. In terms of professional readiness, both categories of in-service teachers responded that teacher leadership practices contribute to the collaborative professional work cultures, brings other teachers closer, and ends the 'generation gap' or conflicts between seniors and novice teachers.

The quantitative data analysis revealed that most in-service teachers are quite reluctant to be labelled as leaders among their novice teachers. Thus, we assumed that even though in-service teachers are the teacher leaders among their novice counterparts, the role of in-service teachers was considered as teachers' colleagues who provide assistance to novice teachers. On the other hand, both teachers from the two types of schools were pleased with the implementation of teacher leadership since it provides a platform for in-service teachers to share their knowledge with other teachers without considering their experiences. The execution of teacher leadership is considered informal professional development for teachers to support, help, and assist other teachers to have the same capabilities as their seniors. Few secondary school teachers felt that participating with teacher leadership practices was not part of their responsibility because they strongly believe that teacher leadership is simply an intentional approach conducted by headteachers to teachers in order to strengthen collegiality and teamwork between teachers. As for the primary school teachers, participation in teacher leadership practices should be considered on a voluntary basis in helping their fellow friends and should not be assigned by headteachers.

In measuring differences, the results exposed that primary and secondary teachers have differences in terms of school grades from both personal and professional categories. Teachers from Grade A schools were more prepared to be teacher leaders compared to their fellow teachers from Grade B schools. Comparatively, primary in-service teachers showed significant difference in terms of personal readiness from two demographic variables which are gender and types of schools. Interestingly, female in-service primary teachers were noted to have higher personal readiness compared to male primary teachers. As secondary in-service teachers, significant differences were measured between their personal and professional readiness from the types of schools. T-test results revealed that secondary in-service teachers from Grade A schools were personally and professionally ready compared to in-service teachers who are working with Grade B schools. We therefore, critically argued that the larger number of teachers serving within a particular school, they felt both personally and professionally ready to help and provide assistance to their colleagues, especially the novice ones.

The interview results demonstrated that in-service teachers certainly cooperate and accept the nomination when selected. For them, being selected as informal teacher leaders is recognition of their good performance in teaching and learning, fulfilling the professional duties and tasks assigned by their headteachers. Though most in-service teachers indicated preparedness to help their fellow teachers, some teachers thought they were unqualified. Notably, this group felt that they lacked experience and skills and believe that other senior and experienced teachers were the suitable qualified persons for the teacher leader post.

Challenges for teacher leadership

In determining in-service challenges of being teacher leaders, we employed both strands to have much better representations of challenges that in-service teacher encountered. Before investigating their challenges in-depth, we asked in-service teachers from both school types about the individual that may form any obstacle to their role as teacher leaders. Surprisingly, in-service teachers chose their head teachers as individuals that give them challenges when accomplishing their roles as teacher leaders. Based on the finding, in-service teacher leaders reported that their headteachers sometimes do not provide support on completing their duties as teacher leaders. The issue of headteachers as individuals who challenge teacher leaders' role was later asked during interview sessions. Through interviews, in-service teachers highlighted problems they face as teacher leaders. First, teacher leaders spoke of the little support provided by their headteachers since they were not given much trust to make decisions related to the school operation. In this sense, in-service teacher leaders revealed that limited opportunities were provided to them in terms of decision making. In fact, most decisions were made by the school heads. Second, in-service teachers disclosed that some of the headteachers were quite afraid of losing their power to teachers even though some in-service teachers believe that the school leaders do not perform their role as credible agent for the school change process. Third, in-service teachers highlighted that even though some headteachers appointed them as teacher leaders; headteachers always intervene in any project completion conducted by teacher leaders. They felt frustrated and

reluctant to conduct leadership tasks since some headteachers do not understand the concept of teacher leader and want everything based on their preferences.

Teacher leaders also reported that challenges experienced were also due to their own weaknesses. As such, some in-service teachers felt that they were not ready to be chosen as teacher leaders, even though they are qualified if their experiences hold. In-service teachers thus stressed that occupying a post of teacher leader was considered challenging since they have to be leaders among colleagues who were novices or seniors. Some of the in-service revealed frustration that some senior teachers were reluctant and even have no confidence in the in-service teachers' ability to lead their colleagues. In dealing with senior teachers, they were not satisfied since they felt they had little experience and skills compared to their seniors. In-service teachers who are young teacher leaders, believe that being a teacher leader is difficult task demanding, especially in influencing senior teachers. This finding is consistent with Snell and Swanson (2000) who reported that other teachers' acceptance towards the role of teacher leaders influences teacher leaders' effective role as leaders within the school community. However, if teachers find it difficult to accept in-service teachers' role as teacher leaders, in-service teachers would be de-motivated and unwilling to accept the post as teacher leaders. Given this result, headteachers should inculcate or create a school climate that emphasises an open climate, collaborative decision making and teamwork that later provides more room for teacher leaders to enhance their influence over led teachers (Mulford & Silins, 2003; Silins & Mulford, 2004; Smylie et al., 2002; Triska, 2007).

Conversely, in-service teachers also admitted that the issue of being teacher leaders stems from their own weaknesses such as lack of confidence to influence and lead fellow teachers. In-service teachers hold are of the opinion that being a teacher leader is a daunting task since some of them have to lead seniors who have more experiences. The in-service teachers, therefore believe they need more experience and knowledge to guide or even help them in gaining other teachers' confidence in their abilities to become teacher leaders. They spelt out that making wise decisions for the school improvement is not an easy task, especially for teachers who were previously trained to only follow orders from the school administration. Some of them believe they need more time and experience before they can be selected as teacher leaders in order to be confident as leaders. Another concern raised by in-service teachers is the issue of their informal appointment. Teacher leaders are appointed on an informal basis. So, the in-service teachers believed that it is quite difficult for teachers to follow instructions from informal leaders compared to teachers who hold formal leadership posts since other teachers assume that leadership posts should be appointed formally. Given the issue of informal appointment, teacher leadership researchers (Smyser, 1995; Timperley, 2005) highlighted cautionary note on disrespecting informal teacher leaders received where some teachers show rejection because they hold traditional assumption that school leaders should be formally appointed (Murphy, 2007). This certainly reduces the willingness of in-service teachers to be selected as teacher leaders since they believe that some challenges exist due to the formal or informal appointment of teacher leaders (Torrance, 2012).

In-service teachers also stressed another important issue related to the selection of teacher leaders, which is time and extra workload. For some teachers, they were occupied with heavy workloads such as instructional tasks and routines that prevent them from being a leader among their teams. As teachers, they have to teach, monitor students' projects, fulfil administrative workloads, and extra-curricular activities which take much of their time at school. Therefore, they have little time to be effective leaders who are able to guide, mentor, and coach their colleagues. Harris and Mujis (2005) posited that being involved with teacher leadership, teacher leaders certainly have much more responsibilities and broader tasks that require most of their time and capabilities. Therefore, some teachers may resist becoming teacher leaders (Carter et al., 2006) because they have an assumption that as teachers, much of their time should be devoted to teaching and learning (Phillips, 2004; Smith, 2007; York-Barr & Duke, 2004) and thus, less preference were given for the work of teacher leaders. The appointment as teacher leaders certainly add to their workload. They suggested decreasing amount of teaching workload since they are engaged with extra responsibilities as teacher leaders.

Recommendations for future study

The study put forward some recommendations for good practice of teacher leadership in the Malaysian education system. The recommendations are classified into policy-based and implementation-based initiatives that should be undertaken by the Ministry of Education and headteachers. Both policy-based and implementation-based initiatives were conceptualised within a framework called the Malaysian Teacher Leader Initiative Framework illustrated in Table 8.

Table 8. Malaysian Teacher Leaders Initiatives Framework

Policy-based Initiatives (Ministry of Education)	School-based Initiatives (Headteachers)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nationwide campaign on the implementation of teacher leadership in Malaysian schools - Provide more courses on teacher leadership to in-service teachers - Exposure on teacher leadership concept to head teachers from primary and secondary schools - Introduce leadership as a subject for pre-service teachers in faculties of education and teaching colleges. - Introduce a postgraduate certificates and qualification for teacher leaders - Formal appointment for teacher leaders as equal with middle layer school administrators. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inculcate open climate and collaboration between in-service teachers. - Provide trust in-service teachers. - Engage teacher leaders within the school leadership community. - Practicing more distributed leadership with in-service teachers/teacher leader - Strengthen teachers' collegiality through teacher leadership as part of informal professional development initiatives. - Offer more chances to teacher leaders to participate in school decision making process. - Conduct courses and workshops on leadership.

First, the implementation of teacher leadership should be practised through nationwide execution in all schools in Malaysia. This is because teachers are familiar with the teacher leadership concept and believe that through teacher leadership, collaboration, collegiality, and teamwork would be improved since they work as a team in accomplishing school improvement initiatives.

Second, the Ministry of Education should provide courses and workshops for in-service teachers to enhance teacher leadership in schools. With these relevant courses, in-service teachers' attributes, skills, and dispositions related to their role as teacher leaders can be improved and schools would have more teachers who are qualified and have high motivation to be selected as teacher leaders. At the same time, the education authorities should conduct courses centred on teacher leadership concept as an initiative to introduce teacher leadership to all school headteachers. With some information and understanding related to teacher leadership, headteachers would be able to enhance, motivate, and guide in-service teachers, providing them chances and opportunities in managing and leading schools.

Third, teacher education programmes offered by the faculties of education in Malaysian public universities and teacher education colleges should embark on a course related to leadership and emphasis should be given to the content not just as leaders to students but also to fellow teachers. With the relevant information, pre-service teachers who would soon be in-service leaders would prepare themselves in terms of personal and professional requirements to be selected as teacher leaders. Also, Ministry of Education together with public universities are recommended to offer postgraduate certificates or Masters courses which assist in equipping in-service teachers to be teacher leaders. These courses should consist of topics such as attributes of teacher leaders, their roles and tasks and even the professional capacities to be an ideal teacher leader.

Fourth, experienced in-service teachers should be appointed, since they exhibit high skills, disposition and ability to be teacher leaders. Formal recognition from other fellow teachers makes it

easier for in-service teachers to lead their teams, especially when they have to deal senior teachers who do not respect junior teacher leaders in terms of experiences.

Headteachers are pertinent individuals in determining the effectiveness of the school improvement process together with teachers as the noteworthy agents for improvement in every school programme. Therefore, as school leaders, headteachers should provide many initiatives with objectives to improve teacher leadership practices or teacher leaders' capacity as part of the school leadership ecosystem. Thus, headteachers should lead schools with an open and conducive climate to enhance collaboration among teachers. With an open climate, headteachers would be able to relinquish power to teachers and the extent to which teachers accept the influence of colleagues who have been appointed as teacher leaders. In addition, headteachers should provide more trust to in-service teachers to be teacher leaders. With the inclusion of trust and more opportunities, teacher leaders would engage themselves with decision making and leadership activities. Without trust provided by school leaders, the collaboration, collegiality, and peer control through teacher leadership within the school culture would be a failure (Kilinic, 2014).

The study also provides suggestions for improvement in future empirical studies that investigate teacher leadership through more in-depth approaches. First, the absence of headteachers' perceptions on the in-service teachers' readiness is required in future studies related to teacher leadership practices. Since this study only used in-service teachers' perceptions without comparing the headteachers' perceptions on whether in-service teachers were ready professionally and personally to be teacher leaders. Second, this study could be expanded through the perceptions of novice teachers in order to provide a more comprehensive viewpoint on leadership qualities of their teacher leaders. Third, the study needs further replication with more in-service teachers. This would then place the research into the larger picture of quantitative post-positivism using a much bigger sample. Another aspects that could be added to the study are measuring the in-service teachers' job commitment as part of dependent variables in examining the effectiveness of teacher leadership practices. Lastly, this study should be replicated using a naturalistic approach through other qualitative methods in order to gather in-depth information regarding the effectiveness of the teacher leadership practice in Malaysian education system.

Conclusion

Teachers are the backbone of the success of every school programme, they thus determine the effectiveness of every operational aspect within the school context. Therefore, we need capable and quality teachers who are able to play their pertinent roles as teacher leaders in leading, mentoring, and coaching their novices as part of assisting approaches. Even though some researchers believe that teacher leadership is beyond the reach due to the school structural difficulties, we steadfastly believe that teacher leadership practices are valuable to teachers' informal professional development process and have effect on headteachers' strategic approach to strengthening teacher's collegiality and collaborative efforts not just between teachers but also with school leaders at large.

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