

# Teacher Leadership in Special Education: Exploring Skills, Roles, and Perceptions

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## Abstract

*Special Education teachers frequently assume formal or informal leadership roles and responsibilities across disciplines (Council for Exceptional Children, 2015a, 2015b). However, despite the increasing attention paid to teacher leadership on an international scale (Wenner & Campbell, 2016), little research exists on the experiences and needs of teacher leaders within the diverse field of Special Education. In this descriptive phenomenological study, we addressed the following questions: 1) What does teacher leadership within the landscape of Special Education look like? 2) How does this work relate to the roles and dispositions laid out in both the Teacher Leader Model Standards (2011) and the Council for Exceptional Children's Special Education Specialist Preparation Standards (2015a, 2015b)? We found that Special Education teacher leaders primarily demonstrate leadership via support, specifically through the skills of advocacy, facilitating, innovating, and 'administrating'.*

**Keywords:** special education, teacher leadership, professional development, teacher education, qualitative methods

## INTRODUCTION

Special Education teachers frequently take on formal and informal teacher leadership roles at their schools (Council for Exceptional Children, 2015a, 2015b). Indeed, it could be argued that all Special Education teachers serve as teacher leaders simply given the scope of their collaborative responsibilities across disciplines and grade levels (Billingsley, 2007; Council for Exceptional Children, 2015a, 2015b; Klingner & Vaughn, 2002; York-Barr, Sommerness, Duke, & Ghore, 2005). Despite the de facto role of experienced Special Education teachers as teacher leaders, however, there is little research specifically on teacher leadership within Special Education. Existing studies include York-Barr et al.'s (2005) exploration of the roles and responsibilities of inclusive Special Education teachers; Billingsley's (2007) case study of a Special Education teacher who took on leadership roles at her school site and within her district; and Vernon-Dotson's (2008) study on teacher collaboration to promote inclusion in General Education classrooms.

In this descriptive study, we drew primarily upon Billingsley's (2007) findings to examine 17 additional cases of teacher leaders in Special Education. We were interested in exploring what teacher leadership looks like within the interdisciplinary landscape of Special Education, and how this relates to the roles and responsibilities laid out in the Teacher Leader Model Standards (2011)<sup>1</sup> and the Council for Exceptional Children's Special Education Specialist Advanced Preparation Standards (2015a). Our goal was to contribute to a better understanding of the variety of

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<sup>1</sup> Since initiating our study in 2010, a revised document entitled "The Teacher Leadership Competencies" has been collaboratively published by the National Education Association, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and the Center for Teaching Quality (2018), designed to replace the Teacher Leader Model Standards. However, since our study was crafted with the original Teacher Leadership Model Standards in mind – as presented to our participants – we have maintained the original wording. We should note that Special Education remains conspicuously absent from the newly published Teacher Leadership Competencies, thus substantiating the relevancy of our concerns as outlined in this paper.

leadership roles and responsibilities Special Education teacher leaders (or SETLs) currently take on, thus allowing SETLs working within and across diverse disciplines to receive appropriate support and guidance from administrators, teacher-educators, and professional development providers – all with the ultimate outcome of benefiting students with diverse learning needs.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher leadership has been defined in numerous ways (NEA, NBTS, & CTO, 2018; Wenner & Campbell, 2016; York-Barr & Duke, 2004), with most researchers echoing Katzenmeyer and Moller's (2009) description of a teacher leader as "one who leads both in and beyond the classroom, identifies with and contributes towards a community of teacher learners and leaders, and influences others toward improved educational practice" (pp. 164-165). The roles taken on by teacher leaders can be either formal or informal, paid or unpaid, full-time or part-time (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Margolis & Huggins, 2012; Sun, Frank, Penuel & Kim, 2013). While more research is needed directly linking teacher leadership to improved student outcomes, numerous benefits to teachers and schools have been noted (Wenner & Campbell, 2016).

Missing from current literature on teacher leadership, with just a few exceptions, is an explicit discussion of how teacher leadership plays out within the field of Special Education. In her case study of a single Special Education teacher taking on leadership roles, Billingsley (2007) noted that most discussions about leadership within Special Education center around roles for administrators, without taking into account the variety of leadership responsibilities assumed by Special Education teachers themselves. She posed numerous questions for future research, including one which served as a direct impetus for our own study: How do Special Education teacher leaders perceive their roles?

York-Barr et al. (2005) explored the roles and responsibilities required of Special Education teachers supporting students with low incidence disabilities in inclusive educational settings, and their findings unexpectedly yielded results related to teacher leadership. They posited that "the work of special educators in inclusive education settings is appropriately viewed as teacher leadership" (p. 193), and more specifically, they found that "embedded in the work of the special educators were leadership functions required to create and sustain the momentum for inclusivity which is not a dominant cultural norm" (p. 205). Among the ideas noted by York-Barr et al. as "areas for learning and development" for teacher leaders within Special Education were "directing the work of paraprofessionals and working within a variety of curricular frameworks" (p. 212). These suggestions emerged in our own findings, as we discuss below. Finally, in a multiple case study project, Vernon-Dotson (2008) documented the impact of three school-based teacher leadership teams focused on improving inclusive opportunities for students with mild to moderate disabilities. Vernon-Dotson found that levels of inclusion increased, though the quality of inclusion remained poorly defined.

The Council for Exceptional Children's (2015) Special Education Specialist Advanced Preparation Standards outline seven core areas of skills Special Education teachers are expected to meet as they achieve increased competency in their craft. While these standards do not specifically mention teacher leadership, many of them relate to the Teacher Leader Model Standards (2011). See Table 1 below for a side-by-side comparison of both sets of standards.

**Table 1**

Teacher Leader Model Standards and Special Education Specialist Advanced Preparation Standards

Teacher Leader Model Standards (2011)	Special Education Specialist Advanced Preparation Standards (2015)
<u>Domain I:</u> Fostering a Collaborative Culture to Support Educator Development and Student Learning	1. Assessment 2. Curricular Content Knowledge 3. Program, Services, and Outcomes
<u>Domain II:</u> Accessing and Using Research to Improve Practice and Student Learning	4. Research and Inquiry 5. Leadership and Policy
<u>Domain III:</u> Promoting Professional Learning for Continuous Improvement	6. Professional and Ethical Practice 7. Collaboration
<u>Domain IV:</u> Facilitating Improvements in Instruction and Student Learning	
<u>Domain V:</u> Promoting the Use of Assessments and Data for School and District Improvement	
<u>Domain VI:</u> Improving Outreach and Collaboration with Families and Community	
<u>Domain VII:</u> Advocating for Student Learning and the Profession	

As we conducted a deeper analysis of these two documents, we found an overlap between teacher leadership expectations – either explicit or implicit – in both General and Special Education, across disciplines. However, the unique work taken on by Special Education teachers adds an extra dimension to the discussion, one that merits the direct attention we give it here.

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

We designed our project as a phenomenological study to explore “the common meaning for several individuals” – in this case, Special Education teacher leaders – “of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). Our aim was to develop “a composite description of the essence of the experience... for all of the individuals” (p. 76), with a culminating emphasis on the “what” and “how” of this experience.

When developing our guiding research questions for this study, we began by determining three keys areas of inquiry, then added more specific sub-questions to focus our research. The resulting questions – a mix of descriptive and interpretive questions (Maxwell, 1996) – are as follows, with broader questions followed by related sub-questions:

- 1) How do Special Education teachers define and perceive teacher leadership within their field? What characteristics, skills, or roles do Special Education teachers believe are relevant to teacher leadership more broadly within Special Education, and specifically in their current positions?

2) What leadership roles and responsibilities do Special Education Teacher leaders (SETLs) take on? How does this vary within different grade spans, school settings (private versus public), and job descriptions/titles?

3) How do SETLs believe they can become more effective as teacher leaders? What teacher leadership skills do SETLs feel they are strong or not so strong in? What form(s) of training and support from administrators would SETLs most like to receive in terms of continuing their professional development as teacher leaders?

In this paper, we report on findings from research questions one and two; findings from question three are discussed in a separate paper.

### **Participants**

Participants in a phenomenological study are strategically selected so that they have all experienced the phenomenon in question – in this case, teacher leadership within Special Education. To that end, we employed a purposeful sampling approach to identify potential Special Education teacher leaders (SETLs) who might serve as key informants for our study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). Given that no operationalized definition exists of a “teacher leader”, we relied on a combination of administrative referral and self-identification of individuals to select participants. A sample of 17 potential SETLs in Southern California were sent an email inviting them to consider participation in the study if they felt they met the criteria (answering yes to the question, “Would you define yourself as a teacher leader?”), and were informed about the goals and methods of the study, as well as their rights as participants. All agreed to participate.

In order to achieve maximum variation within our sample (Maxwell, 1996), we solicited participation from Special Education teachers working in a variety of settings, capacities, and disciplines. Our 17 participants (2 men, 15 women) taught in classes ranging from pre-school to elementary to high school, across a span of disciplines, in a variety of school settings. They represented a range of ethnicities (three Latino, two Asian-American, two African-American and ten White), ages (from 25 to 62), and years of experience (from newer teachers with just 5-6 years of teaching experience, to veteran teachers with more than two decades of teaching and other leadership duties). All participants were assigned pseudonyms. Table 2 below provides an overview of participating teacher leaders’ stated ethnicities, genders, ages, school settings, and years of teaching experience.

**Table 2**

Participants' Ethnicity, Age, Gender, School Setting, and Years of Experience

<b>PARTICIPANT</b> (pseudonym)	<b>STATED ETHNICITY</b>	<b>STATED AGE</b>	<b>STATED GENDER</b>	<b>TYPE OF SCHOOL</b>	<b>TOTAL YEARS TEACHING</b>
Allie	White	25	Female	Catholic	4
Daniel	Latino	32	Male	Public	5
Cynthia	White	43	Female	Non-Private School	5
Kimberly	White	29	Female	Catholic	6
Erica	Latina	34	Female	Public	6
Marie	White	56	Female	Public	6
Olivia	Latina	45	Female	Public	7
Louisa	White	32	Female	Non-Private School	8
Jon	Asian-American	32	Male	Public Charter	8
Julianne	White	43	Female	Public Charter	11
Gloria	White	62	Female	Public	14
Karen	White	45	Female	Public	17
Tameka	African-American	42	Female	Public	20
Sharon	Asian-American	54	Female	Public	21
Susan	White	44	Female	Public	22
Benita	African-American	53	Female	Public	22
Linda	White	59	Female	Public	38

**Instruments**

We conducted semi-structured interviews (20-45 minutes long) with each participant in order to better understand their specific experiences as Special Education teacher leaders (Seidman, 1991). Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions designed to elicit their thoughts and opinions on teacher leadership within Special Education (Lavy, 2003) (see Appendix A).

**Data Analysis**

Interview data were analyzed using an inductive, constant comparative approach, which allowed us to refine our interview questions and begin to make sense of our findings early in the process (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In our first coding cycle, we employed several integrated coding methods. First we utilized line-by-line Initial Coding to break our data into discrete units, examining them and comparing them for similarities and differences (Saldana, 2009). During this process, we also employed In Vivo codes by highlighting quotes from the participants that seemed especially powerful or salient as “symbolic markers of participants’ speech and meanings” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 55). Next, we utilized Structural Coding to label and index responses to our key questions (Saldana, 2009). We coded all responses to the question, “What leadership roles do you currently take on as an educational specialist at your school?” as CURRENT TL ROLES. We employed a third initial coding process – Process

Codes – to capture key activities engaged in by each of the participants, using gerunds to preserve “the fluidity of [participants’] experience” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 49).

For instance, the following Process Codes emerged in our analysis of Kimberly’s transcript: advocating for students, communicating with parents, educating colleagues, facilitating collaboration, handling discomfort, modeling lifelong learning, pioneering special education initiatives, seeing the bigger picture and shifting school culture. Process codes were then compared across transcripts.

We conducted a second cycle of coding to further refine our initial codes and determine salient categories and themes (Saldana, 2009). During this cycle, we “developed a sense of thematic...organization from [our] array of First Cycle Codes” (p. 149). Our final Theoretical Code – serving as an “umbrella that covers and accounts for all other codes and categories” (Saldana, 2009, p. 163) – was Supporting, with the following sub-categories further shaping our collective findings: Advocating, Facilitating, “Administering”, and Innovating.

## **FINDINGS: DEFINITIONS, ROLES, AND SKILLS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER LEADERS**

In this section, we discuss participants’ responses to the following interview questions:

- 1) How do you define teacher leadership?
- 2) Do you believe there is a role for teacher leadership in the world of Special Education? Why or why not?
- 3) What leadership roles do you currently take on as an Educational Specialist at your school?
- 4) In your opinion, what characteristics or skills do Educational Specialists need to possess in order to be effective leaders?

We use the abbreviation “SETLs” as short-hand for the specific participants in our study, while acknowledging that their responses can’t necessarily be generalized to all Special Education teacher leaders.

### **Defining Teacher Leadership**

Although our study focused specifically on teacher leadership within Special Education, we began by asking participants to define the term “teacher leadership” more broadly; responses were varied and complex. In her lengthy definition of teacher leadership, for instance, Julianne noted responsibilities ranging from “being a strong force in the classroom [to] creating an enriching environment conducive to learning which fosters student strengths and allows these students to progress academically”, to serving as “a positive mentor to colleagues”, to being someone who “works collaboratively with all stakeholders to better instruction for students” (Interview, February 23, 2011).

Linda pointed out that teacher leaders will invariably manifest their leadership in different ways, depending on their comfort level and personality:

Teacher leadership, I think, comes in different ways – it can be at the classroom level, as a mentor, as a colleague, that helps to lead others... There’s the leader who wants to stay in their own classroom and lead that way and there’s the leader who wants to jump out and find other places to lead as well. (Interview, June 13, 2011)

Indeed, SETLs (like teacher leaders across all settings) take on a variety of roles and responsibilities depending on their unique situations, strengths, interests, and capacities. One common theme across participant responses was the belief that a teacher leader is someone who does more than “just” teach – that is, he or she is

“willing to take on more than just the daily requirements of teaching” (Marie, Interview, February 15, 2011) and is available to serve in other capacities. As Sharon described it: “I [see] teacher leadership as being lead teacher, or being like a central person your principal and co-teachers can come to to get information or to get help, or to be a mentor” (Interview, February 15, 2011).

According to our participants, teacher leadership encompasses a broader commitment to improving one’s school (Levenson, 2014). Karen, a recent teacher-of-the-year at her school site and in her district, noted that teacher leadership involves “doing a lot of research in new ideas, bringing new ideas to the table, constantly trying to come up with new things that you can do for your department or for the school in general” (Interview, June 17, 2011) – thus keeping the school’s broader vision and well-being in mind. Daniel similarly noted that a teacher leader is one who “really looks at the school as a whole, and really takes into consideration the strengths and needs of other people in their department... [to] work together to close the achievement gap with their kids” (Interview, June 13, 2011).

Being a voice of the school and an advocate for students was also seen by our participants as a critical element of teacher leadership, particularly within the sphere of Special Education. Kimberly, the only Special Education teacher at her small private school, described a teacher leader as “a teacher who takes charge and has the students’ best interests at heart and is willing to stand up and, you know, do whatever he or she needs to do to make sure the needs of the students are met” (Interview, January 19, 2011).

### **Situating Teacher leadership within Special Education**

While our first question encouraged participants simply to define teacher leadership, our follow-up question provided an opportunity for them to think more specifically about teacher leadership in the context of Special Education. In response to the question, “Is there a role for teacher leadership in the world of Special Education?”, every participant responded “yes” without hesitation. Eight began their response with “definitely”, six with “absolutely”, and one with “of course”.

Without prompting, all participants elaborated on why they feel the way they do about this issue. One common theme was the need for SETLs to move out of the “silos” in which Special Education teachers often find themselves (Hunt, Powell, Little & Mike, 2013). As Louisa stated:

I think it’s necessary; otherwise you’re out on an island by yourself. If you’re not collaborating and taking the initiative to take ideas to the next level, then I just think you can only function at half capacity. You can’t really do everything that needs to be done, or better the program that you’re in, or better your knowledge. (Interview, March 7, 2011)

Similarly, Gloria mentioned the need to be proactive with General Education teachers:

It used to be that when a teacher went into their classroom and closed the door, they were an island unto themselves, [which is not] the way it is these days. We have to be open and collaborative with anybody, no matter what part of the education field. (Interview, February 15, 2011)

Thus, the SETLs in our study view teacher leadership as a way to encourage and support more collaboration between General Education and Special Education teachers.

Marie’s response focused on mentoring as a salient facet of teacher leadership, noting that “a lot of people who come into Special Education don’t have a clue what they are getting into” and that sharing her expertise with new teachers is where she has “found that [her] role in leadership has been really valuable” (Interview, February 15,

2011) (c.f. Duffy & Forgan, 2004; Mastropieri, 2001; Shillingstad, McGlamery, Davis & Gilles, 2015). Susan similarly noted:

I've worked with district interns... and it's interesting to hear them week to week describe scenarios where they are supported in their first year, and scenarios where individuals are not supported... There's a big difference in how those individuals take classes, how they interact socially. So yes, they need a mentor, they need a leader to support them. (Interview, February 3, 2011)

### **SETLs' Current Leadership Roles and Responsibilities**

Special Education teachers take on a variety of different leadership roles by the very nature and description of their multi-faceted and interdisciplinary jobs (Conderman & Katsiyannis, 2002; Council for Exceptional Children, 2015a, 2015b). When asking our SETL participants to tell us some of the specific leadership roles they have inhabited, we anticipated hearing a variety of responses – however, certain commonalities emerged, which we discuss below.

Collaboration with colleagues was a key responsibility named by most participants. Erica, who is currently working in a district office and was reflecting back on her days as a teacher leader at her school, noted that “partnering with all of my General Education friends was a big piece of that leadership work, and I think I saw the most ripple effects when I partnered not just with my Special Education colleagues; we found ways to bring all those folks together, instead of working in isolation” (Interview, June 13, 2011).

For Daniel (also currently working in a district office), collaborating with and befriending his General Education colleagues when he was a teacher served the larger goal of helping to effectively mainstream his special needs students into General Education classrooms. He noted: “I really tried to kind of connect on a personal level, and once I had that connection – I had to do what I had to do, I kind of threw a curve ball in there and got my kids in the door” (Interview, June 13, 2011). Daniel's statement ties into the notion of advocacy for students with special needs – a critical role of SETLs that we return to later in this article.

Another common responsibility reflected in participants' responses was modeling best teaching practices. Julianne noted: “I am responsible for promoting good teaching practices that allow students access to grade level curriculum” (Interview, February 23, 2011). This role may involve explicit mentoring or coaching; as Jon pointed out, “I've also... mentored other teachers, new teachers coming in to Special Education as well as General Education – just giving them tips and strategies, just being a support network for them as well” (Interview, February 22, 2011). Working to improve best practices may also involve the formation of professional learning communities (Vernon-Dotson, 2008), such as the “IEP [Individualized Education Plan] clinic” mentioned by Susan, in which she and her colleagues look at “what problems are we having with IEPs and the process, or, looking at grade-level standards, looking at strategies, looking at a lesson, how can we improve” (Interview, February 3, 2011).

Other SETLs in our study mentioned the leadership role of being the “go to” person or “point person” at their school site. Susan told us that in her second year as a Special Education teacher, she began “managing the IEP schedule for the school, making sure the communication between related service providers, administration, parents... was coordinated” (Interview, February 3, 2011). Marie similarly noted:

I'm part of the professional learning community [at my school], which means I'm considered a teacher leader by my peers. I'm the person they come to if they have a question about behavior, about Special Education, or the classroom, about how a student qualified for Special Education. And on occasion if they

are having challenges with some of my [Special Education teaching] peers, other teachers will seek me out and we'll discuss ways to solve that problem in a way that's positive. (Interview, February 15, 2011)

Thus, according to Marie's experiences, SETLs not only serve as essential "gatekeepers" for Special Education at their schools, but also function in a mediating capacity as needed, when interpersonal problems arise between colleagues (Vernon-Dotson, 2008).

Sharon, who co-teaches Pre-K half-day classes, mentioned that her primary role as a teacher leader is serving as the lead teacher for the "morning team" at her school; however, she noted that her other duties include working with the principal and the lead speech team on curriculum development; helping with interviewing new staff and faculty; disseminating information to all teachers; and being available to help with administrative duties when her principal is away from the site once a week (Interview, February 21, 2011). Thus, for Sharon, being a teacher leader occasionally shifts into administrative duties as needed. Jon also officially splits his time between classroom teaching (as a Resource Teacher) and administrative responsibilities as a vice principal at his public charter school (Interview, February 22, 2011).

Other roles and responsibilities mentioned were coordinating the software used to help generate IEPs; serving as testing coordinator; participating on various other committees and teams; and working closely with and training paraprofessionals.

### **Characteristics and Skills of Special Education Teacher leaders**

When our participants were asked to describe what characteristics and skills they felt should be possessed by SETLs, the most dominant response was "people skills" – specifically, an ability to communicate well, collaborate effectively with others and see situations from others' perspectives (von Frank, 2013). Erica's immediate response to this question was that "those social emotional skills, I think, are very important – that emotional intelligence to collaborate with other people" (Interview, June 13, 2011). Sharon similarly stated right away, "I guess the first [trait I would list] would be 'approachable'" (Interview, February 21, 2011). Louisa specifically noted that it is important for SETLs to be able to communicate "in a way that's constructive and doesn't alienate anybody" (Interview, March 7, 2011) These responses all point towards our participants' belief in the importance of SETLs being able to communicate effectively with their colleagues and others they work with, and to come across as an approachable colleague who is available and willing to help.

Indeed, the ability to successfully interact and communicate information without alienating one's colleagues was mentioned by several participants as especially important for SETLs. Kimberly, for instance, noted, "I think you need to be able to... sound professional, but not be intimidating, be able to talk on a parent's level, a student's level, talk to a teacher so you don't come across like you know everything and what they're doing is completely wrong" (Interview, January 19, 2011) Karen similarly pointed out that "you have to be able to communicate very well with [colleagues], and be a team player, yet at the same time guide them in certain areas, so that it's a team decision, and not just top down" (Interview, June 17, 2011).

Other interpersonal skills and characteristics were also named in participants' responses to this question. Jon stated the value of both "patience" and "compassion" (Interview, February 22, 2011), while Susan pointed out the "win-win" nature of effective collaboration as a teacher leader, noting:

I will always see [an issue] through my lens, and a very busy lens, and so I need to collaborate with the General Ed teacher, or my colleague, or the person that's on the yard watching the child at lunch or such,

because if you only, for example, write an IEP through your eyes, it's very limited. (Interview, February 3, 2011)

The ability to view a situation through others' perspectives points to the broader need for SETLs to exhibit flexibility – not just when working with colleagues, but in one's classroom as well. As Jon stated, "You'll have a few students sent to you with behavior problems, and that will shift your whole day. Being able to take that, be flexible with it, but still maintain your course of action [is critical]" (Interview, February 22, 2011).

Flexibility is just one among many skills the SETLs in our study say they have demonstrated when serving as a professional role model to colleagues. Jon noted that SETLs must continuously be:

... demonstrating some skills or experiences that you have in helping others to be able to support students in Special Education or General Education, because my belief is that good teaching is good teaching, so the strategies that we're learning in Special Education apply for gifted kids as well as those who may have autism or [are] lower functioning [in a General Education setting]. (Interview, February 22, 2011).

Given how many roles a SETL plays on a daily basis, and the numerous critical details involved in Special Education documentation, organization on both a micro and macro level was another important skill mentioned by our participants. Gloria noted:

You have to be able to coordinate your primary job and all the other little things that you do" (Interview, February 15, 2011), while Jon pointed out that, "You have to be able to cross your Ts and dot your I's – I guess that goes back to details. You have to be very detail oriented" (Interview, February 22, 2011).

Expertise with curriculum and standards across a range of grade levels and disciplines was also an important concern for the SETLs in our study (Council for Exceptional Children, 2015a, 2015b). Sharon mentioned the need to be knowledgeable "about... how to modify lesson planning, and how to even assess a child's level and adapt" (Interview, February 21, 2011), while Erica noted that SETLs "have to have a deep understanding of their pedagogy", to "really... understand why you're doing what you're doing" (Interview, June 13, 2011). Several participants pointed out the importance of being familiar with academic standards across disciplines and at all grade levels, to "be supportive of all students and teachers" (Gloria, Interview, February 15, 2011).

A final SETL trait which appeared repeatedly as a broader theme throughout all interview responses was that of being proactive. As Jon put it, if you are a SETL you must be "proactive in your planning and anticipating problems that may occur, or even anticipating how you want to take a class as far as content, or as far as instruction or even behavior management or behavior plans" (Interview, February 22, 2011). Being proactive implies not simply sitting back and being told what to do; as Gloria noted, "You... have to be a person who is outgoing, somebody who's willing to take on responsibilities. You have to be motivated" (Interview, February 15, 2011).

This particular characteristic ties in to the broader theme of advocacy (discussed in more detail below). Benita, for instance, specifically noted that a SETL must "be a fighter – so that's the first thing; you have to always be looking out for the needs of others" (Interview, November 30, 2010). Indeed, most of the participants we interviewed mentioned instances in which they have had to take initiative at their schools in order to make positive changes on behalf of students (Jacobs, Beck, & Crowell, 2014). Daniel's previously cited story about establishing connections with his General Education peers in order to effectively mainstream his students is one example of this (Interview, June 13, 2011). Kimberly shared an anecdote in which her principal wanted her to "take more [of a] back seat" and let teachers come to her rather than going to them, but she said she "[has] a problem with that", given that "the students are then the ones that are going to suffer" (Interview, January 19, 2011). Indeed, Kimberly's

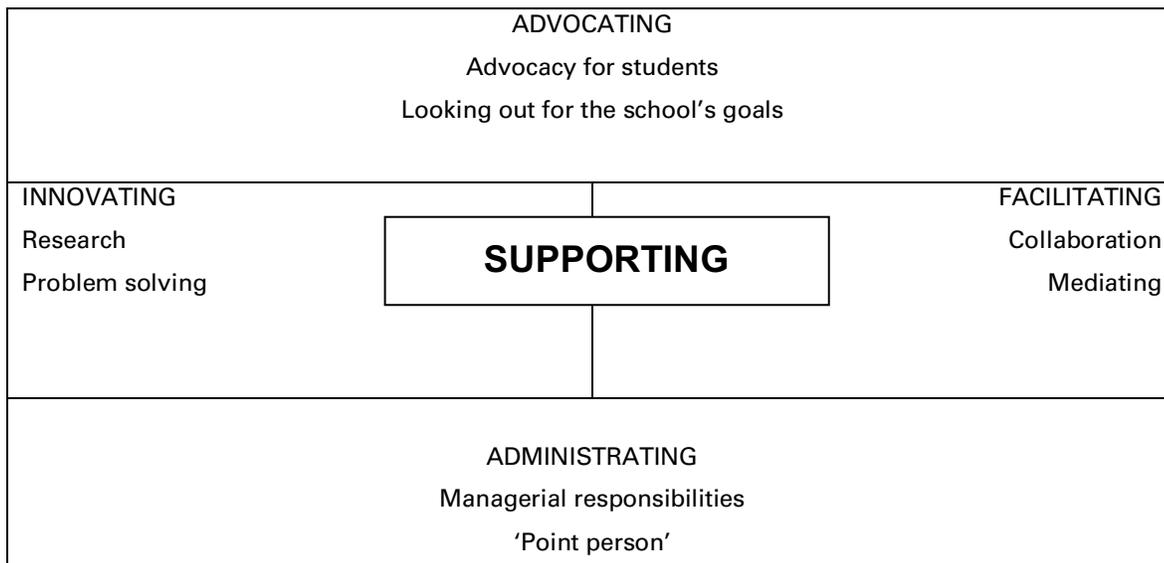
definition of a Special Education teacher leader as someone “who takes charge and has the student’s best interests at heart and is willing to stand up and, you know, do whatever he or she needs to do to make sure the needs of the students are met” reflects this sense of commitment to serving as an advocate for students’ needs.

### DISCUSSION: SETLS SUPPORTING STUDENT SUCCESS

Much of what we learned from our participants’ interview responses corresponds to similar findings from previous studies with General Education teacher leaders (York-Barr & Duke, 2004); however, there are a number of distinctions as well. As we engaged in second cycle coding of our initial findings, we looked for dominant themes related to the phenomenological “essence” of teacher leadership specifically within Special Education (Creswell, 2013). Our final Theoretical Code – serving as an “umbrella that covers and accounts for all other codes and categories” (Saldana, 2009, p. 163) – was Supporting, with the following sub-themes further shaping our collective findings: Advocating, Facilitating, “Administrating”, and Innovating. In Figure 1 below, Supporting is positioned as the core of teacher leadership in Special Education, with the four sub-themes surrounding it in no particular order or orientation:

**Figure 1**

How do SETLs lead through support?



While data supporting these sub-themes inevitably overlap, for the sake of clarity each is discussed individually below. Each section begins with an interview quote which provides a snapshot of how SETLs impact students and schools. Throughout our discussion, we make connections to both the Teacher Leader Model Standards (2011) and the Council for Exceptional Children’s Special Education Specialist Advanced Preparation Standards (2015a).

#### Advocating

“I kind of threw a curve ball in there and got my kids in the door.” – Daniel (Interview, June 13, 2011)

SETLs in our study made it clear that they are first and foremost advocates for their students. Interview responses indicated that SETLs work in a variety of ways to proactively ensure that all students’ needs are being met. This includes meaningful collaboration with General Education teachers (also discussed in the next theme of Facilitating);

staying up-to-date on effective strategies and laws related to serving students with special needs; and serving as the “gatekeeper” for mandated plans (such as IEPs) at their school site.

Erica noted the importance of ensuring that students with special needs are integrated into a broader school community that is welcoming for all:

Our students are part of a school community – and so, recognizing that I could just work with kids with disabilities, but the reality is our students are part of a school community, and how do we create an environment where all students are welcome? (Interview, June 13, 2011)

The skill of advocacy is highlighted in Domain 7 of the Teacher Leader Model Standards (Advocating for Student Learning and the Profession) and in Standard 5 (Leadership and Policy) of the Special Education Specialist Advanced Professional Standards (2015a):

5.4 Special education specialists advocate for policies and practices that improve programs, services, and outcomes for individuals with exceptionalities.

5.5 Special education specialists advocate for the allocation of appropriate resources for the preparation and professional development of all personnel who serve individuals with exceptionalities. (p. 5)

While being proactive is implied in York-Barr and Duke’s (2004) statement that teacher leaders are “creative innovative seekers of challenge and growth” (p. 268), advocacy per se is noticeably missing from the studies included in their widely cited meta-review. In recent years, however, advocacy on behalf of students, teachers, parents, the school, and the broader community has emerged as an increasingly important facet of teacher leadership (Lukacs & Galluzzo, 2014; NEA et al., 2018). Jacobs et al. (2014), for instance, explore teacher leaders as “equity-driven change agents” who work to address the “inequities that continue to be present for students of color, for English-language learners, for students from low-income households, for LGBTQ students and for students with disabilities” (p. 576). Yet teacher leadership within Special Education – such as meeting the specific needs of students with disabilities – is noted only in the abstract of Jacobs et al.’s article, indicating a need for further exploration and study within this area.

## **Facilitating**

“Otherwise, you’re out on an island by yourself.” – Louisa (Interview, March 7, 2011)

Louisa’s statement above (referenced earlier in our article) was an elaboration on her “yes” response to the question, “Do you believe that there is a role for teacher leadership in the world of Special Education?” She asserted, “If you’re not collaborating and taking the initiative to take ideas to the next level, then I just think you can only function at half capacity.” The sub-theme of Facilitating encompasses a broad set of interpersonal skills needed to successfully collaborate with colleagues across disciplines and grade spans, including but not limited to modeling best teaching practices, proactively training paraprofessionals, and mediating conflicts or misunderstandings. These skills emerged time and again throughout all the interviews we conducted, and resonate with findings in other studies that “the success of teacher leadership depends largely on the cooperation and interaction between teacher leaders and their colleagues” (Yarger & Lee, 1994, p. 229).

The skill of facilitating is highlighted in Domain 4 of the Teacher Leader Model Standards (Facilitating Improvements in Instruction and Student Learning) and in Standard 3 (Program, Services, and Outcomes) of the Special Education Specialist Advanced Professional Standards (2015a): “Special education specialists facilitate the continuous improvement of general and special education programs, supports, and services at the classroom,

school, and system levels for individuals with exceptionalities” (p. 3). As indicated by several of our participants – and supported by recent research on co-teaching and mentoring (Brown, Howerter & Morgan, 2013; Hunt, Powell, Little & Mike, 2013) – Special Education teachers cannot exist in a “silo” by themselves. They must exhibit strong interpersonal and facilitation skills in order to proactively navigate between various stakeholders – parents, teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals – to ensure each child’s success in school (McInerney, Zumeta, Gandhi, & Gersten, 2014).

SETLs not only need up-to-date knowledge on laws and research pertaining to Special Education, but they must be able to pass this information on to their colleagues in a way that does not sound intimidating or demanding. As Erica noted:

Those teacher leaders on school campuses are those people who just know how to connect with other people on the campus, at all levels. Being able to partner with them, to bring them along, to meet that vision – and participate in the work, because we all know there’s plenty of work to be done. (Interview, June 13, 2011)

Jon spoke specifically about the importance of facilitating interactions with parents, noting, “You’re talking with parents, you’re giving them feedback, you’re updating them about students’ academic progress, their challenged academic progress, what may be hindering them” (Interview, February 22, 2011).

### **Administrating**

“I’m the person they come to.” – Marie (Interview, February 15, 2011)

SETLs’ work as supportive teacher leaders can also be viewed through the lens of administrating, a gerund we’ve chosen deliberately here to avoid more hierarchical and evaluative terms such as managing, directing, or supervising. For Sharon (a pre-K teacher), administrating means taking direct leadership of her school when the director is gone: “If anything comes up that needs an administrator, we’re responsible for handling it.” Sharon added that taking on a role as Lead Teacher with occasional administrative responsibilities has allowed her to take a “systems perspective” and understand “there are a lot of other things [besides teaching] that are needed to make the program or school run. What better way to do than to be actively involved in it?” She stated this helps her to see the “bigger picture” of facilitating success for students.

SETLs are often viewed as the “point person” teachers, administrators, and parents can go to at a school. As Marie put it:

I’m the person [my peers] come to if they have a question about behavior, about Special Education, or the classroom, about how a student qualified for special education. And on occasion if they are having challenges with some of my [Special Education teaching] peers, other teachers will seek me out and we’ll discuss ways to solve that problem in a way that’s positive.

The skill of “administrating” is not overtly stated in either the Teacher Leader Model Standards (2011) or the Special Education Specialist Advanced Professional Standards (2015a), leading us to believe it may be less of an intentional goal for teacher leaders and more of a pragmatic function and outcome of the work.

### **Innovating**

“Make sure the needs of the students are met.” – Kimberly.

Kimberly's quote above speaks to the fourth sub-theme to emerge from our findings: SETLs are continuously innovating to ensure that students' needs are met. This includes conducting research, attending conferences, bringing new information back to colleagues, and problem solving. Erica noted that Special Education teacher leaders need to be part of new initiatives and policy implementation at a school site from an early stage:

There's a lot going on from the General Education world, and Special Education just gets pulled in at the end, to give it the final stamp of approval, and that's a little late! By then, everyone's already established it – so it's really about getting in at the beginning, establishing the vision, being there when they establish that, being part of the work of developing the tools or the policies that they're trying to establish.

In addition to being a critical part of initial policy implementation, SETLs can play a crucial role in ensuring continuity of services for exceptional children in the face of principal turnover and other systemic challenges (Strickland-Cohen, McIntosh, & Horner, 2014).

The teacher leadership skill of innovating through facilitation of their own and colleagues' learning is highlighted in several domains of the Teacher Leader Model Standards – most notably Domain 2 (Assessing and Using Research to Improve Practice and Student Learning), Domain 3 (Promoting Professional Learning for Continuous Improvement), and Domain 4 (Facilitating Improvements in Instruction and Student Learning). Similarly, it is explicit in many of the Special Education Specialist Advanced Professional Standards (2015a), such as the following, to name just a few:

2.2: Special educators continuously broaden and deepen professional knowledge, and expand expertise with instructional technologies, curriculum standards, effective teaching strategies, and assistive technologies to support access to and learning of challenging content. (p. 2)

3.0: Special education specialists facilitate the continuous improvement of general and special education programs, supports, and services at the classroom, school, and system levels for individuals with exceptionalities. (p. 3)

4.0: Special education specialists conduct, evaluate, and use inquiry to guide professional practice. (p. 4)

Clearly, SETLs – like General Education teacher leaders – are innovators whose work can potentially have a profound impact on student outcomes, across disciplines.

## CONCLUSION

### Limitations

A limitation to our study was the fact that our sample was small and primarily self-selected. Without clear criteria for who should be considered a Special Education teacher leader – a definition that does not yet exist – we were unable to identify potential participants other than through self-selection, which we then corroborated through administrative recommendations and our personal knowledge of participants' leadership skills and responsibilities. While we attempted to interview as diverse a set of participants as possible (see Table 2), we are aware that their responses cannot necessarily be generalized more broadly.

Another limitation was that our participants did not possess a comprehensive sense of the various leadership duties and responsibilities taken on by SETLs, or what types of duties would be considered relevant under this heading. Future research is clearly needed – ideally with an observational component included – in order to more accurately identify the breadth and depth of responsibilities taken on by SETLs. This is especially important given York-Barr and Duke (2004)'s suggestion (citing a study by Smylie & Denny, 1990) to use caution when asking teacher leaders to describe what types of leadership roles they take on, given that the reality of what they state they do may differ from what they intend or actually are able to do.

### **Implications and Next Steps**

As noted previously, many skills and dispositions possessed by SETLs map directly onto teacher leadership within General Education. We do not intend to perpetuate a division between General Education and Special Education teacher leaders, given that all are working together towards the common goal of student success across all disciplines; with that said, we believe it is important to specifically highlight and discuss teacher leadership within Special Education in order to ensure that SETLs receive targeted support and are able to capitalize on their unique strengths and positions. While our discussion here focused on Special Education teacher leaders promoting student success, teacher leadership research has largely found positive effects on teacher leaders themselves. For instance, providing teacher leadership responsibilities can potentially prevent teacher burnout, which is an especially pressing problem within Special Education (Brunsting & Sreckovic, 2013); this connection merits further exploration.

A broader question to be explored in the future is whether all Special Education teachers might be considered teacher leaders, simply by the nature of their diverse job descriptions. In the CEC's Initial Preparation Standards (2015b) – which outline expectations for novice Special Education teachers – Standards 6.5 and 6.6 within the domain of Professional Learning and Ethical Practice include language directly related to teacher leadership, such as advocacy, mentoring, and providing guidance to other adults. For instance, Standard 6.5 indicates that "Beginning special education professionals advance the profession by engaging in activities such as advocacy and mentoring", while Standard 6.6 states that "Beginning special education professionals provide guidance and direction to paraeducators, tutors, and volunteers" (p. 7).

Collaboration is also an essential expectation for novice Special Education teachers. Standard 7 (Collaboration) states:

Beginning special education professionals collaborate with families, other educators, related service providers, individuals with exceptionalities, and personnel from community agencies in culturally responsive ways to address the needs of individuals with exceptionalities across a range of learning experiences. (p. 7)

We believe the CEC initial preparation standards clearly encompass elements of teacher leadership, as substantiated by our findings. To that end, while we were intentional in our solicitation of experienced teachers who self-described as SETLs (and thus clearly viewed themselves as leaders), a future study should solicit responses from a more representative sample of Special Education teachers, including novice teachers, to see how many of the traits we uncovered are inherent in the role itself.

As we noted in our introduction, we believe a more specific definition of a SETL – as distinct from a General Education teacher leader – is necessary, especially given that such a distinction has not traditionally been called out in the literature. While many of the characteristics and skills possessed by General Education teacher leaders certainly apply to SETLs, there are unique qualities and roles that should be highlighted. Elaborating upon

Katzenmeyer and Moller's (2009) definition of a teacher leader as "one who leads both in and beyond the classroom, identifies with and contributes towards a community of teacher learners and leaders, and influences others toward improved educational practice" (pp. 164-165), we propose the following preliminary definition of a SETL:

A Special Education Teacher Leader (SETL) is one who leads both in and beyond the classroom, proactively influencing colleagues towards improved educational practice for diverse learners across disciplines. A SETL continuously advocates on behalf of students with special needs; serves as a gatekeeper for important legal and ethical information regarding Special Education (and effectively communicates this with all stakeholders); trains paraprofessionals and other colleagues to work effectively with students with special needs; and maintains an active familiarity with a range of grade level standards and effective pedagogical tools.

This definition is lengthy, but begins to more accurately reflect the true breadth of critical roles and responsibilities played by SETLs.

In addition to this preliminary definition, we propose that the existing Teacher Leader Standards (2011) and the newly published Teacher Leadership Competencies (NEA et al., 2018) (see Footnote 1) be amended to account for unique leadership responsibilities taken on by Special Education teacher leaders. Possible examples include:

- Assists colleagues in representing and advocating for the rights and needs of students with special needs.
- Promotes a positive schoolwide attitude towards inclusion.
- Ensures that paraprofessionals are engaged in relevant and appropriate activities, and adequately trained to provide effective assistance for students with special needs in diverse disciplines.
- Shares information with colleagues regarding how trends and policies related to Special Education can impact classroom practices and expectations for student learning.

Finally, we recommend explicitly highlighting teacher leadership within the Special Education Specialist Advanced Preparation Standards, to call out this facet of expected expertise within the field.

Our findings in this initial study are just the beginning of what we hope will be an ongoing exploration of the complex landscape of teacher leadership within Special Education. Although our study is descriptive rather than explanatory, we believe our findings represent a necessary first step in the direction of understanding how teacher leadership plays out specifically within Special Education. Once we possess a rich description of how SETLs carry out their work and what leadership skills they feel are critical to their success, educators and administrators can build on this understanding to offer new and seasoned Special Education teachers the opportunities to improve and enhance their leadership – ultimately benefiting all students with diverse needs.

## Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What is your name? Age?
2. What school do you currently teach at?
3. What type of school is it? Public or private?
4. What grade level(s) do you currently teach?
5. What is/are your official title(s)?
6. How many years have you been teaching (in General or Special Education)?
7. How do you define teacher leadership?
8. Do you believe there is a role for teacher leadership in the world of Special Education? Why or why not?
9. What leadership roles do you currently take on as an Educational Specialist at your school?
  - a. When and why did you first start taking on these roles?
10. Would you like to be able to take on additional leadership roles? If not, why? If so, which ones, and why?
11. In your opinion, what characteristics or skills do Educational Specialists need to possess in order to be effective leaders? Do you possess these qualities yourself?
12. What qualities do you feel you still need to develop in yourself in order to be an effective teacher leader?
13. Is your administrator supportive of Special Education on campus, in general? Why or why not? Please give specific examples.
14. Do you feel your administrator is supportive of you taking on leadership roles? If not, why? If so, in what ways?
15. Do you feel that others on your campus (i.e., your colleagues, your administrators, paraprofessionals, parents) perceive you as a leader? Why or why not?
16. Do you work with paraprofessionals? If so, how many and in what capacity?
17. Did you work as a teacher's assistant before becoming a teacher? If so, for how long, and in what capacity? Please tell me a little bit about this experience.
  - a. Were you encouraged (and/or given the opportunity) to take on more of an active role in the classroom?
  - b. Were you encouraged (and/or given the opportunity) to increase your leadership skills?
18. Why did you decide to become an Educational Specialist? Did you know from the start that this was the direction you wanted to take within the teaching field?
19. Finally, in an ideal world, what type of training and/or support would you like to have in order to become more effective as a teacher leader on your campus?

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