Teacher Leadership Otherwise: Problematizing Teacher Leadership Practices*

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Abstract

This chapter shares my personal journey, which begins from a universal I attempted to foster and the struggles I faced through the doctoral program to problematize it. TL has extensively been studied under Euro-Western paradigms, analyzing how teachers' belongingness practices of leadership in and out the classroom through a decolonial perspective tension the top-down approach of TL. Unpacking what teachers have to say about their TL practices based on their specific constructions of belongingness. It will contribute to delinking from the canonical theorization of TL in ELT. Furthermore, it will problematize TL from a bottom-up approach where ELT teachers unveil their struggles to enact TL using their life experiences and practices.

Keywords: belongingness; leadership embodiments; life experiences; social justice; teacher leadership.

Introduction

This chapter attempts to discuss teacher leadership (TL) in English Language Teaching (ELT) from the perspective of leadership practices of belongingness under a decolonial take. It problematizes teacher leaders' tensions towards being classroom teachers and leaders, using their geopolitical positions to overcome students' adversities and look for social justice.

The first section, entitled "Locus of enunciation," presents my personal experience as an experienced formal leader and my shift to being a schoolteacher. In it I describe how these professional versions of myself merged and placed me in the grey area of leadership. Being placed outside of the standard made me feel I was out of place, but now that I belong to a place and a community, I live my authentic version, my true self. The second section, "Research interest," discusses in general terms the three waves of TL in the U.S., as well as some studies about TL in ELT which explore the phenomenon using a management approach. The following section, called "Colonial situation under examination," provides a brief profiling of relevant research articles about TL abroad and in Colombia, setting the framework for the research questions and objectives of this proposal. The last section, "Contributions," speaks about TL practices and belongingness and the relevance of exploring these issues in ELT to present new paths to unpack our teacher identity.

I hope you enjoy this journey full of questions to reflect on your own appreciations of your ELT teacher role and the actions we can take inside and outside of the classroom to advocate for equity in the school community.

Locus of Enunciation

As an English language teacher, I feel deeply concerned about TL. In my professional life, I have been a project manager, educational consultant, academic coordinator, teacher educator, and material developer. After playing these roles, I wanted to share all the experiences I had from living, working, and studying in Colombia and abroad. I have studied in public institutions my whole life, and I wanted to make my contribution to education. When I decided to be a schoolteacher, leadership was a part of myself. Exercising power from different professional roles made me defiant and critical of the status quo; I was not afraid to speak my mind, and my personal interest in becoming an agent of change unfolded in my TL.

As a novice teacher, I helped some of my students avoid recruitment into gangs and enrolled them in extracurricular clubs. Because of this, I was threatened by criminal groups. The first warning came from a parent who had heard

that I was a target and asked me to leave for my own safety. I ignored the situation and kept working. Some days later, the second warning came from a gang member who came to the school and gave me 24 hours to leave. I was scared and anxious; I could not work, I looked for a new school, and I was relocated.

I was lucky to be quickly removed: I know there are numerous teachers who have been killed and did not have the chances I had. I am grateful to have the opportunity to share my experience and even more to be part of a school where my voice matters. When I arrived at this school, I was scared to face a similar situation, so I played my role as a teacher. I did not want to draw any attention, and I was focused on my classes. However, my commitment to helping students was intact, and it was just a matter of time before I began to be more active in the school. I noticed that these teachers were like me: They were all working on different projects to motivate students' learning. They were committed professionals who built strong bonds with families. Therefore, I felt safe and happy to be teaching once again.

Nevertheless, I wondered why these teachers were so out of the ordinary. They know their students and care about them, as well as their colleagues. They make decisions keeping in mind students' needs, and when a family is struggling, teachers mobilize and take action to help. TL is something they feel like their own; they lead based on their expertise and work together as a team. If a teacher suggests a project, all peers discuss the advantages students can take from it and embrace the new venture with commitment. There is no resistance to change and bringing forth innovative ideas; they are critical, and if they consider new policies do not benefit the school, they reject them and keep working on their personal and team projects. Thus, these teachers' strong institutional identity is clear: They are proud of the community they belong to; they believe in and keep a record of the school project they have been building for so long.

Although I was a part of the school community, I wanted to understand more about this warming school, and I carried out my first research project entitled *Liderazgo docente y justicia social. Aproximaciones desde la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera en Colombia* (Teacher leadership and social justice. Approaches from teaching English as a foreign language in Colombia) to identify the connection between TL, school improvement, and teachers' reflexivity towards social justice. At the time, I understood TL from a colonial perspective, that is, under a canonical approach which subjugates teachers to perform TL based on a set of behaviors to improve students' learning. Mignolo & Walsh (2018) state that coloniality refers to the control and management of knowledge by "universals" of Western modernity, Eurocentrism, and global capitalism. According to my research project, the "universals" of teachers following policies and working

together to improve students' outcomes to empower communities replicates the top-down approach of TL. This Westernized assumption of reciprocity between teachers' efficacy and academic results allowed me to keep digging into teachers' identity. I developed a second research project entitled *Prácticas pedagógicas: Espacios reflexivos para la caracterización del liderazgo docente en los maestros en formación y en ejercicio*[1] (see Méndez-Sarmiento, 2022). It was an attempt to characterize teachers' TL profile from pre-service and in-service ELT teachers' voices. I explored TL from the angle of identity, focusing on teacher leader characteristics. This study concluded in a TL profile, and a set of desired personality features that constitute teachers as agents of change in ELT. These two works contributed to the top-down mainstream literature in teacher leadership.

My conceptualization of TL based on school improvement and teachers' personality was problematized in this doctoral program. My exploration of TL as a facilitator to implement policies effectively, by means of inspirational teachers able to influence peers and mentor pre-service and in-service teachers formally or informally, building an intermediate leadership level according to McMahon (cited in Bernal & Ibarrolla, 2011) mobilizing colleagues and educational administrators to make a positive impact on students' learning to foster quality in education. I thought TL must be exercised by ELT teachers. These universals forced me to adapt to conceptualizations and ways of doing aligned to canonical ways of conceiving leadership. In other words, TL was disposed of critical elements that shed light upon other relationalities with the team, the content, and the students.

After being exposed to decoloniality, I could embrace a new perspective towards TL. I was able to see beyond the surface, and new elements emerged, such as TL struggles: the bright, the grey, and the dark side. I understood TL as something you own and choose to take—a personal decision you make to help students overcome adversity—but I wondered why TL had numerous ways of being portrayed. Mignolo & Walsh (2018) state that "decoloniality is a perspective, stance, and proposition of thought, analysis, sensing, making, doing, feeling, and being that is actional (in the Fanonian sense), praxistical, and continuing" (p. 100). I pinpointed the grey areas: What about a decolonial relational perspective of TL? How do teachers' lives influence the way they enact TL and are how belongingness and TL related? After several inner talks, I could navigate my boundaries and dive into the cracks of TL. My research problem delves into unveiling our (my colleagues' and mine) English language teachers' leadership

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1   Pedagogical Practices: Reflexive Spaces for the Characterization of Teacher Leadership for In and Preservice Teachers.

practices of belongingness[2] both inside and outside of the classroom by exploring our life stories to bring to the surface the political, affective, and social component of ELT. We work in a public school in Bogotá, we work in different shifts (morning and afternoon), branches (A and B), and levels (Primary, Secondary, and High School Complementary Project), and we are a team. Through a Professional Training Program (PTP) we were able to share and learn more about each other, and we built a bond by caring for each other and working together.

After the PTP, in 2016, we designed a down-to-earth and an articulated syllabus addressing students' needs covering all levels (Primary, Secondary, and High School Complementary Project). There, we understood our ideas and concerns and found a shared interest in helping our students to overcome their hard living conditions. Teachers' actions to support the community turned around: looking for sponsors to improve our teaching resources, pedagogical training, and parents' involvement. Through these activities we discovered who we were and understood what we could do as individuals. There was a mutual recognition of ourselves as educators, and we began to support each other: There was an embodiment of TL[3] in each of us. We embraced TL based on ourselves as humans who belong to different settings outside of school. Our fluid TL embodiment expresses who we are as individuals and community members—it evolves and changes, in the same way we do as educators.

This first attempt to unpack the concept from an ontological perspective acknowledges how teachers exercise their TL practices of belongingness inside and outside the school, exploring their ways of being, doing, and feeling, as well as problematizing the tensions regarding TL that exist within them.

Research Interest

In the following section I will go through an exploration of the work that has already been done in relation to the concept of TL and TL in ELT (even though there is scarce research about TL in ELT). My aim is to highlight the importance of bringing TL to the ELT field and present my uncertainties towards TL drawing on the decolonial turn. I am working on a discussion about belongingness, and I am aware that there is still a gap. As a first attempt, belongingness is defined

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2   Teacher Leadership Practices of Belongingness are the ways each teacher chooses to navigate school daily life under a relational perspective of being, doing, and feeling free and safe to be his/her authentic self in a given space (Grant, 2020).

3   "Embodiment" refers to feminist theory, where the body plays a key role in understanding the different relations of domination/resistance that are established: the marks of power that are traced in the body, but also the process of healing these wounds.

according to Grant (2020), Riley (2022), and Allen *et al.* (2021) as specific senses of affinity (school, place, and culture) where one feels free and safe to be one's authentic self in a given space.

Regarding TL, this concept has been conceptualized under three waves in U.S.: The first wave had to do with organizational roles and the ways in which teachers are put in positions of authority by administrators (Smylie & Denny, 1990). The second wave is based on teachers' professional knowledge, and the ways teachers are placed in roles to apply instructional knowledge as specialists (Silva *et al.*, 2000). The third wave combines formal and informal roles, meaning that teachers lead both inside and outside of the classroom (Wenner & Campbell, 2017).

Thus, in the last 20 years the concept of an individual leader has been replaced. TL styles have turned into a collective, task-oriented, and organizational approach, under the following leadership styles:

- Distributed (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999), where leadership responsibilities are spread among teachers and administrative staff.
- Shared (Lindahl, 2008), based on a collaborative decision-making process which involves teachers and administrators.
- Transformational (Hallinger, 2003), which inspires teachers to contribute to school improvement.

Considering schools can be managed as companies sharing common principles of improvement and productivity.

TL in ELT has been discussed to explore how power in role positions fosters or inhibits teacher-leaders' performance (Shah, 2020). This hegemonic view of TL is about exercising hierarchical power to control and achieve management goals such as students' enrollment or students' performance in standardized tests and does not allow teachers to embody their own TL practices. On the other hand, Greenier & Whitehead (2016) searched for an authentic leadership model of teacher education programs, suggesting that teachers were not conscious of their classroom leadership; however, this leadership was evident in their pedagogical practices. Furthermore, Kavakli & Arslan (2019) studied the perceptions of EFL teachers as educational leaders in the Turkish EFL context, identifying goals for building teacher-leaders' capacity to achieve outcomes in language teaching and learning.

In contrast, this study aims to contribute to the body of knowledge by unpacking what teachers have to say about their TL practices based on their specific constructions of belongingness. It will contribute to delinking from the canonical

theorization of TL in ELT. Furthermore, it will problematize TL from a bottom-up approach where ELT teachers unveil their struggles to enact TL using their life experiences and practices. This is an attempt to unfold TL from teachers' voices, under a relational and situational perspective (unlike TL in Colombia, which has been exercised from the canonical approach of management, productivity, and improvement).

Colonial Situation Under Examination

In this section, I would like to analyze the concept of TL worldwide and TL in ELT in Colombia to problematize English teachers' leadership practices of belong-ingness. With this purpose in mind, it is necessary to reflect on the varied ways TL is embodied. There are two main trends regarding TL in Colombian publica-tions: the conceptualization of TL in official education policies in Colombia, and cross-cultural perspectives towards TL. TL has been openly discussed as a pro-fessional skill one can perform; however, I would like to tackle TL from the per-spective of belongingness and enlightenment, as a personal choice one makes.

Conceptualizing TL

The wide exploration of TL around the world highlights the importance of debat-ing this concept in the Colombian educational setting. However, it is necessary to go deep into the concept of TL because it has been studied from different academic fields and perspectives, making it hard to understand and define it. In order to explore TL, I will present some relevant research articles which focus on its conceptualization.

Kahler-Viene *et al*. (2021), in the article "Exploring the concept of teacher leadership through a document analysis in the Australian context," discussed how teacher leadership is understood and conceptualized from an Australian docu-mentary perspective spanning the national, state, regional, and local education administrative levels. Results indicated that teacher leadership is strengthened through professional and collaborative practices. Harris & Jones (2019) found that the importance of leadership is recognized as a critical factor. Furthermore, Kahler-Viene *et al*. (2021) stated that teacher practice is positively impacted by teacher leaders who influence their colleagues to take a lead in policy-making decisions. However, the definition of what constitutes teacher leadership and how it manifests across school settings remains ambiguous. Although it is clear that many teachers serve as leaders, schools have traditionally relied on a hierar-chical system where leadership responsibilities appear to be clearly demarcated and reinforce the idea of the top-down approach (Harris, 2003). This contradicts

the idea that teachers play a pivotal role as agents of change through collaborative, informed decision making.

Moreover, Bradley-Levine (2018), in the article "Advocacy as a Practice of Critical TL," states that teacher advocacy is displayed in TL; TL takes place within the classroom and across the school. By advocating on behalf of students who are marginalized, teachers demonstrate a model for critical TL. Findings show the need for teachers to take on leadership roles, informal or formal, in order for personal and professional growth to take place and to improve in schools. Internal and external impediments to teachers becoming leaders make the transition from "just a teacher" to "teacher leader" difficult.

Besides, Hunzicker (2017), in her publication "From teacher to teacher leader: A conceptual model," presents conceptions of TL embracing informal and integrated approaches. According to this author, TL is a stance or a way of thinking and being, rather than a set of behaviors. As a result, understanding how teachers progress from teacher-to-teacher leader remains unclear. This article offers a visual model conceptualizing eight teachers' progression from teacher-to-teacher leader, including the factors and conditions that influenced their progress and their varying self-perceptions as teachers and as leaders. Four developmental stages of teacher leader self-perception are explored: teacher leader, developing teacher leader, situational teacher leader, and classroom teacher leader. Findings of the study indicate that TL stance precedes the actions of TL; development of teacher leader self-perception may take longer.

In addition, Wenner & Campbell (2018), in the article "Thick and thin: Variations in teacher leader identity," discuss TL identity that reveals itself in soft and strong manifestations. These authors explore the ways in which individuals participated in TL and how participation and identities— described as 'thick' and 'thin' TL identities—were shaped.

For this study, TL emerges from classroom teachers who challenge the status quo and perform actions to support students and teachers' needs to overcome adversity (Hunzicker, 2017). TL is the combination of the professional and personal choices we make in school (Kahler-Viene *et al.*, 2021). It is based on our reflexivity, the community we belong to, the people we are, the pedagogical knowledge we have built, the life experiences we have had (Wenner & Campbell, 2018), and the formal or informal leadership positions we have been in (Bradley-Levine, 2018).

TL in Colombia

Colombian scholarly work regarding the conceptualization of TL in-service English teachers was taken from three articles: Pineda-Baez (2021), Fierro-Evans & Fortoul-Ollivier (2021), and Arden & Okoko (2021). Due to the lack of studies carried out in relation to this concept, no more information was available. However, the relevance of these studies and the profiling trace the first trend: the conceptualization of teacher leadership in official education policies in Colombia.

According to Pineda-Baez *et al*. (2019), the conceptualization of TL in official education policies in Colombia is scarce and has been mainly focused on the role of principals, neglecting teachers' voices and their contributions regarding school leadership. In the article "Conceptualizations of teacher leadership in Colombia: Evidence from policies," Pineda-Baez (2021) examines the concept of TL in Colombia's official education policies, using teachers' qualifications to expand the concept. The author conducted a content analysis of recruitment, selection, and evaluation of teachers. Results indicate that the concept of TL is nonexistent in Colombia and that the documents conceptualize leadership in terms of hierarchical figures, leaving aside the role of teachers in school improvement. The study identifies the importance of promoting the image of the teacher as a leader.

Furthermore, Fierro-Evans & Fortoul-Ollivier (2021), in the article "Reflexivity: An essential feature of TL in Mexico, Colombia, and Spain," discussed a comparative analysis of educational policy documents on leadership and teacher development in Spain, Colombia, and Mexico, in order to better understand the concept of TL from one of the most important elements in terms of teachers' personal and professional growth. They inquired about the relevance of teacher reflexivity in TL, especially in highly complex contexts. Their findings show that reflexivity is an appropriate category to explore the association between the international discourse on TL and the personal and professional growth that has a deep impact on teachers' performance.

For the second trend in cross-cultural perspectives towards TL, the article "Exploring cross-cultural perspectives of TL among the members of an international research team: A phenomenographic study" (Arden & Okoko, 2021) presents a phenomenographic study exploring diverse understandings and experiences of TL among 12 members of the International Study of TL research team comprised of 20 academics based in 10 countries. Phenomenographic analysis of interview artefacts revealed three broad domains of TL: 1) The school, school community, and formal education system; 2) The teacher-leader's professional self; 3) The

broader historical, sociopolitical, and global contexts of TL. The study speaks to the experience of TL as a relational phenomenon showing referential and structural components of awareness, involving personal and professional growth, advocacy, and agency as main features.

TL in Colombia is going to be addressed in this research through a journey of unveiling classroom teachers' voices from a decolonial perspective, inviting participants to unpack their life experiences and TL practices of belongingness using their reflexivity. This study aims to explore teachers' TL practices of belongingness to subvert the hierarchical TL conceptualization, under the following research questions and objectives:

Research Questions

What teacher leadership practices of belonging are embodied by English language teachers to foresee other educational possibilities?

Objectives

Main objective:

To signify teacher leadership practices of belongingness from the voices of English language teachers to envision new paths to build a school of possibilities.

Specific objectives:

- To identify English language teacher leadership practices that contribute to belongingness by subverting prescribed roles.
- To explore relationalities, actions, and new senses for being at school in which English language teachers embody belongingness.
- To make visible the actions performed by English language teachers to create possibilities for English teaching/learning otherwise.

TL has been discussed and explored from a top-down approach. In Colombia, the struggles of ELT teachers related to TL have not been problematized yet. This makes me wonder what it is like to be on the other side of TL. ELT teachers have been subjected to following policies and responding to the demands of authority roles, but what about teachers who are on both sides? Those teachers who belong to the boundaries of the school system, teachers who led inside and outside of the classroom, teachers who are doing their own actions to support others (teachers, students, families), teachers who participate, enact or resist policies, teachers who go further their responsibilities. Some teachers at this public school in Bogotá exercise leadership without having a management role. Their interest

in contributing mobilizes their agency and contributes to the discussion—what do they have to say about TL?

ELT teachers have been subjected by TL; their life experiences in TL are unseen, their leadership practices ignored. The Western narrative of TL validates a hierarchical school structure where teacher leaders such as specialists or coordinators set new ways to support students' learning and contribute to social change through shared and inspirational practices spread in the staff. However, ELT teachers have been labeled under the tag of subaltern intellectuals, as Kumaravadivelu (2016) called them, that is, teachers who do not subvert the Western ways of knowing and language and thus belong to the colonial matrix of power.

For this study, I am going to take a decolonial position to denaturalize the hegemonic forces around TL, which consider it natural and logical to understand power from a top-down approach. I am going to problematize TL otherwise, exploring from denied ELT teachers, their TL practices, and the varied TL embodiments from a belongingness perspective.

As this is a decolonial study, there are tensions and fears around the corner: I am hesitant to unveil the concept of TL practices, and it may not be enough to explore TL embodiment. Also, I am not yet sure about how to tackle the fact that TL in ELT in Colombia has not been widely discussed before. Perhaps opening my mind to new conceptualizations of TL can include local knowledges that enrich this research attempt. I am aware that TL is a colonial term, which comes with a resistance to unpacking the idea of subverting canonical conceptualizations of leadership. However, I think this is an opportunity to reflect on personal and professional paths and learn more about ourselves as people and teachers and understand a little more about our own TL practices of belongingness.

Contributions

For this section, I am going to explain the contributions to problematizing TL practices of belongingness in ELT teachers, reflecting on my personal journey. These first ideas are far from my doctoral admission research proposal initial perceptions, as they have been highly influenced by seminar discussions and readings and are still evolving:

- Exploring TL from an ontological approach enlightens new paths to embrace reflexivity and shed light on ELT teachers leaders' actions aimed at supporting students acknowledging different TL embodiments.

- TL in ELT could be a new perspective to democratize school administrations, by opening discussion spaces for all school community members to have the chance to participate and make decisions.

- ELT teacher leaders in formal and informal positions recognize teachers' actions to overcome adversity for themselves and the communities they work with.
- TL and belongingness give space for leader teachers to take a breath and put themselves aside or share the power and inspire peers to exercise their own leadership practices.
- TL advocates for equity in the school community, facing, denouncing, and intervening inequities.

To conclude, TL and belongingness in ELT looks for creating new possibilities to recognize how our actions inside and outside of the classroom matter for ourselves and our students. We are all connected, and we are part of the school community; we have the power to denounce and mobilize for social justice. This research attempts to subvert the top-down approach TL has had, resignifying TL by bringing to the discussion elements such as belongingness and leadership embodiments as well as problematizing TL under a humane angle to unveil TL practices as they happen from the angle of teacher-to-teacher reflexivity.

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