Teacher Leaders or Teacher-Leaders? An Argument on Behalf of Hyphenated Hybridity

by Sylvia S. Bagley — February 15, 2016

This commentary proposes that the phrase “teacher leader” adds to confusion about the concept, given many possible interpretations of how the term “teacher” relates to “leader.” We should instead refer to “teacher leaders” as “teacher-leaders,” and linguistically and conceptually position them as simultaneously leaders and teachers.

Teacher leadership is no longer the sleeping giant for catalytic change posited by Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) in their seminal text on the topic. As an increasing number of teachers inhabit hybrid roles—impacting students, colleagues, schools, and districts beyond their own classrooms—they are becoming teacher leaders and taking on more complicated workplace identities (Angelie & Schmid, 2007; Valdez & Broin, 2015). All teachers arguably should be acknowledged as leaders, given that they lead children’s learning on a daily basis, and engage in numerous responsibilities that extend beyond instruction in the classroom like maintaining contact with parents (Sears, 2015).

The term teacher leader possesses a distinct history in educational literature, and first appeared in discussions regarding education reform initiatives in the late 1980s as part of a broader effort to professionalize teaching by acknowledging the importance of veteran teacher expertise (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Teacher leaders—whether they are self-described, officially labeled, or de facto leaders through their actions—have been generally defined as those who “lead within and beyond the classroom” (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009, p. 6), and engage in responsibilities like coaching and mentoring colleagues, facilitating professional learning opportunities, developing curriculum, advocating for broader school change, and more (Jacobs, Beck, & Crowell, 2014).

The term teacher leader remains opaque publicly and within educational spheres despite teacher leadership’s prevalence in many schools. York-Barr and Duke (2004) assert that the lack of specificity about teacher leadership is at least partially due “to the expansive territory encompassed under the umbrella term” (p. 260). Teacher leaders may or may not formally be recognized as such, leave the classroom fully or partially, receive training, earn stipends, and/or take on administrative duties, to name a few considerations (Sun, Frank, Penuel, & Kim, 2013). In this commentary, I argue that the linguistic structure of the term teacher leader adds to our confusion, and that a simple modification—hyphenization—might clarify the scope of the term’s definition by emphasizing the inherent hybridity of teacher-leader roles and responsibilities.

TEACHER LEADER: A COMPOUND WORD

It is unsurprising that the term teacher-leader has emerged in our educational lexicon, given that compound words are considered a “universal human linguistic inheritance” (Libben, 2014, p. 8). They are ubiquitous across cultures, the most frequent type of word formation, and account for 68% of all newly formed words. While there are as many forms of compound words possible as there are parts of speech (i.e., adjectival-adjunctive, adjective+noun, and noun+verb, to name a few—see Nakov, 2013, p. 3), compound nouns like teacher leader (noun+noun) are the most common type in English, and account for 90% of new compound words.

Most compound words are endocentric—they possess a clear head which: a) expresses the central meaning of the word, b) is lexically aligned with the whole term (i.e., belongs to the same part of speech), and c) is modified by the second term. For example, bedroom consists of a head (room) modified by bed (the type of room). In contrast, exocentric compounds—such as swansong—are much less common and lack a clear head.

Compound words in English and most other languages typically have the head as the final point, and native English speakers reading teacher leader might intuitively consider leader to be the head of the term, modified (or defined) by teacher. When we refer to a military leader, business leader, government leader, school leader, or religious leader, we analogously assume these are different types of leaders. They all appear to be straightforward compound endocentric words, and the word leader is modified by the initial term in each case.

SEMANTIC RELATIONS

Semantic relations—or the meaning between words—in endocentric compound words are more complex than they appear (Libben, 2014, p. 14). There is an enormous number of potential semantic relationships between heads and modifiers in compound words, although researchers argue that a finite number occur with greater regularity. Lauer (1995) proposes the use of eight prepositional phrases (about, at, from, in, of, on, and with) to define relations between heads and modifiers (as cited in Séaghdha, 2008). The options for semantically parsing—or making sense of—teacher leader utilizing Lauer’s eight proposed prepositions become:

1. leader about teachers,
2. leader at teachers,
3. leader for teachers,
4. leader from teachers,
5. leader in teachers,
6. leader of teachers,
7. leader on teachers, and
8. leader with teachers

The options in this list that make grammatical sense include leader for teachers, leader from teachers, leader of teachers, and leader with teachers. Looking back at the analogous terms posed above—such as business leader—the logical preposition that most would assume for teacher leaders is of: Just like we refer to a military leader as a leader of the military, a business leader as a leader of a business, a government leader as a leader of a government, a school leader as a leader of a school, and a religious leader as a leader of a religious group, a teacher leader would most likely be parsed as a leader of teachers.

But are teacher leaders actually leaders of teachers, or should that term be reserved for formal principals and administrators? In other words, is the act of leading teachers what teacher leaders do? York-Barr and Duke’s (2004) meta-review of 20 years of research describes the domains of what teacher leaders do as coordinating, managing, mentoring, coaching, developing curriculum, conducting research, facilitating workshops,
It seems that our intuitive sense-making of the term teacher leader does not necessarily lead us to an accurate understanding of what teacher leaders do, or who they are. A slight modification in how we construct this specific compound word offers a potential solution.

**COMPOUND WORD FORMATIONS**

Compound words can be derived in numerous ways—one clever example is when two or more words are blended together into a portmanteau, like smoke and fog combining to form the new word smog. The Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) coined the phrase *teacherpreneur* by combining teacher with entrepreneur to describe “expert teachers whose work weeks are divided between teaching students and designing systems-level solutions for public education” (2015). This compounding technique creates a specific sense of the term, although it doesn’t cover all broadly defined facets of teacher leadership, and is ultimately unique to CTQ’s context.

Balanced pairings or coordinative compounds such as *singer-songwriter* are another compounding option, and create “a blended concept or a superordinate one” (Libben, 2014, p. 9) with the entity—or resulting compound word—and become the sum of the two parts. One term doesn’t define the other; rather, both complement each other equally although the positionality of one term in front of the other arguably implies a sort of automatic hierarchy or preference. Balanced pairings are quite common in Indic languages as well as in Chinese and Japanese (Nakov, 2013), but rare in English. Nonetheless, this is an intriguing idea vis-à-vis teacher leadership—if we consider the term *teacher leader* to be a balanced pairing, we give equal primacy to a teacher leader’s status as both a teacher and a leader.

Recognizing the complementarity of the terms is beneficial, but we can go further to accurately capture what teacher leaders do. I argue that appositional compounding comes closest to representing the complex set of roles teacher leaders play. Examples of appositional compounding include sofa-bed and writer-director, with each of the two nouns representing “a different aspect of the entity that the compound represents” (Nakov, 2013, p. 9, emphasis added). In other words, a teacher-leader would be considered both a teacher and a leader simultaneously. Unlike balanced pairings, where two terms merge to create one idea, appositional compounds maintain two distinctive heads at once.

**A CALL FOR HYPHENIZATION**

All of the examples of balanced and appositional compounds discussed above include a hyphen. I have been contemplating whether the simple linguistic modification of hyphenation might clarify our understanding and parsing of the term *teacher leader*. While compound words can either be hyphenated or not, teacher leader generally isn’t. Searching for the phrase *teacher-leader* on a search engine or in an academic database yields almost no results, and the term instead defaults back to separate words (*teacher* leader). A notable exception is the website for the nonprofit organization Leading Educators, which aims to “bolster the talent pipeline via identifying and training strong potential teacher-leaders and, in turn, increase student achievement” (2015, emphasis added).

I conducted an informal content analysis of a two-part *Education Week* blog post by Larry Ferlazzo (2015a, 2015b), in which he invites responses to the question “How would you define ‘teacher leadership’ and what does it look like in practice?” Ferlazzo’s posts offer an opportunity to assess how often *teacher leader* versus *teacher-leader* appears in a widely read online publication for educators. Ferlazzo does not clarify why both versions are used in his posts, but my assumption is that he simply kept the format provided by each contributor. Part one of Ferlazzo’s dual blog post features responses from six commentators, with *teacher-leader* appearing 23 times, and *teacher leader* appearing 56 times; 2 of the 6 commentators chose the spelling *teacher-leader* over *teacher leader*. In the second blog post featuring responses from 8 commentators, *teacher-leader* doesn’t appear at all, and *teacher leader* appears 68 times.

A preferred format—teacher leader—seems to have been collectively chosen, or at least automatically used, by most but not all educators within the sphere of teacher leadership both in this example and many other written discussions on the same topic. However, the time may be ripe to strategically and intentionally shift our spelling. Descriptive linguists believe that language evolves as we use it, and we must modify our official reference sources to accommodate ongoing changes.

Should we push for hyphenation of teacher-leadership, and make appositional compounding, or at least *balanced pairing*, of this term the new norm? Would hyphenation really make a key difference in semantic clarity of the term (Libben, 2014)? I believe so, given that positing teacher-leader as an appositional compound with mutually co-existing nouns would avoid the semantic confusion of the modifier-head analysis we automatically engage in when reading or hearing non-hyphenated compound words.

**IDENTITY AND HYBRIDITY**

Hyphenization of identity-related labels and terms—such as those involving nationalities, ethnicities, races, and religions—is far from neutral territory (Ali & Sonn, 2010; Louie, 2014). While some argue that hyphenated identity terms splinter one’s core identity, I believe that hyphenization can both “foster a sense of belonging” (Ali & Sonn, 2010, p. 425) and help individuals resist assimilation through self-determination. Hyphenization of a term facilitates hybridity and allows the joining of two distinct identities without one being subsumed by the other (Kraidy, 2005).

Teacher-leaders are not just teachers or leaders; they can be both simultaneously, whether serving in formal or informal leadership roles (Sun et al., 2013). Hybridity is desirable because it leads to “opportunities for dialogue [and] understanding,” thus strengthening “the civil sphere” (Alexander, 2001, p. 249) of education. If those who are invested in education strive towards distributed leadership and a sense of collective responsibility for student success, we must nurture opportunities for dialogue, understanding, and joint work between realms that have historically remained distinct and hierarchical (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2007). The hybridized, hyphenated term *teacher-leadership* acknowledges the multifaceted roles and responsibilities of teachers in schools while maintaining important categorical and perceptual distinctions between administrators and teachers.

While leaders of teachers (i.e., principals) must be instructional leaders in addition to school managers (Fink & Markholt, 2011), the inherently evaluative role of administrators places them in a de facto position of hierarchical authority, regardless of how egalitarian a school culture aims to be. On the other hand, semantically positioning *teacher-leaders* as both teachers and leaders at the same time—whether they are still actively teaching in a classroom or not—can promote more collegial schooling environments in which all constituents (e.g., instructional coaches, team leads, and teachers) continue to learn with one another in a relatively level and intentionally constructive playing field (Barth, 2006).
Hyphenization of teacher leadership to teacher-leadership is not a magic solution that will cure confusion over the continuously evolving scope and importance of teacher-leaders’ work, nor should it become reified as a discrete label representing a certain type of teacher. Marginson (2014) reminds us that while “people need the security and certainty promised by identity...labels are not a substitute for a holistic description of the person and their relational characteristics” (p. 10). The term teacher-leader will never fully describe any dedicated instructor; no matter how many additional responsibilities they take on within or outside the classroom. Teacher-leader deserves its enduring status as a nuanced descriptor that defies easy categorization. However, I believe hyphenization of this term represents a step towards acknowledging both the hybridity and complexity of this important work, and will help us propel teacher-leadership forward as a political and logistical priority in education.

References


