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Student teachers' perspectives towards teacher leadership

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study aimed to explore six student teachers' changing perceptions and understandings of teacher leadership during their participation in a practicum experience in Qatar. The practicum experience particularly targeted developing student teachers' understanding of teacher leadership through discussions, coaching, and mentoring. Data collection was carried out through a quantitative survey, and qualitative semi-structured interviews and weekly reflective journals in order to document not only changing perceptions, but also the factors influencing such changes. Findings revealed some improvement in student teachers' definitions, awareness, and practises of teacher leadership. However, they did not fully associate their practises as being completely leadership-oriented. Implications of the study pertain to providing suitable opportunities for leadership development within teacher preparation programs to help student teachers acknowledge their contributions and practises as pertaining to teacher leadership.

Introduction

Several researchers have addressed the importance of teachers' role in educational reform and their role in increasing students' achievement (Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012; Ergeneli, Ari, & Metin, 2006). Moreover, teacher leadership has gained great interest in the past few decades as a vital aspect of educational leadership and school reform. Previous studies conclude that teachers have 'the capacity to lead the school via increasing teacher collaboration, spreading best practises, encouraging teacher professional learning, offering assistance with differentiation, and focusing on content-specific issues' (Wenner & Campbell, 2017, pp. 1–2).

Despite the great attention to teacher leadership in Western countries, there is a dearth in studies related to teacher leadership in Arab countries (Al-Taneiji & Ibrahim, 2017; Al-Zboon, 2016; Ramahi & Eltemamy, 2014). This lack of research becomes ever more necessary as several Arab countries have launched educational reforms in their countries in order to improve their educational systems (Alfadala, 2015; El-Baz, 2009; Karami-Akkary, 2014). Most of these educational reforms have been implemented with a top-down approach by the government. Generally, educators and teachers have been required to implement educational changes, yet often lacked the

courage to try new ideas out of fear, or due to insufficient knowledge and skills (Karami-Akkary & Rizk, 2012). Moreover, many Arab countries do not have teacher preparation programs as a university degree or an educational certificate, and any graduate with a Bachelor degree can work in schools as a teacher (Nasser, 2017; Zellman, Constant, & Goldman, 2011).

Similarly, educational reform has been high on Qatar's political agenda. Since the inception of its educational reform, Qatari officials have launched several professional development opportunities for teachers and school leaders (Al-Banai & Nasser, 2015; Alfadala, 2015; Nasser, 2017; Romanowski, Cherif, Al Ammari, & Al Attiyah, 2013). Furthermore, Qatar University restructured its College of Education in 2004 and offered new teacher preparation programs according to the needs of the educational reform which was based on curriculum standards for students and professional standards for teachers and school leaders (Nasser, 2017; Zellman et al., 2011).

With all this emphasis on teacher preparation in Qatar, and the belief in the premise 'that teacher education should focus on preparing teachers for the expanded role required in these school reforms' (Rogers & Scales, 2013, p. 20), this study aimed to explore student teachers' perceptions of teacher leadership in Qatar, and their readiness to articulate the Ministry of Education's goals to achieve the Qatar 2030 vision. The next section will show the main definitions of teacher leadership and theories used in this study, as well as the methodology, findings, and discussion.

Teacher leadership

The concept of teacher leadership is considered an umbrella term which includes formal and informal roles, such as professional development coordinator, trainer, head teacher, first teacher, and assessment coordinator (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Levin & Schrum, 2016; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). It is obvious that the background of teacher leaders comes from two roles: teaching and leading. York-Barr and Duke (2004) define teacher leaders as those who 'are or have been teachers with significant teaching experience, are known to be excellent teachers, and are respected by their peers' (p. 267). However, there is a need to emphasize the influence of teachers as an important criterion of teacher leadership, as some teachers occupy formal leadership roles, but do not lead or make change (Grenda & Hackmann, 2014). In this study, we follow York-Barr and Duke's (2004) definition that 'teacher leadership is the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practises with the aim of increased student learning and achievement" (pp. 287–288).

A common understanding of teacher leadership entails the leadership practises implemented by teachers inside their classrooms. In this case, the main followers of teachers who practise leadership are the students (Augustsson & Boström, 2012). However, other scholars link teacher leadership to leading colleagues through training and coaching activities, in this case the followers are colleagues (Henning, 2006; Lowery-Moore, Latimer, & Villate, 2016; Taylor, Yates, Meyer, & Kinsella, 2011). However, restricting teacher leadership to specific followers raises the assumption that all teachers can be leaders if they only led their students. Additionally, identifying specific followers may imply the existence of power relationships, which is not the case

of teacher leaders as they may practise leadership both formally and informally. As Anderson (2004) emphasized, 'teachers could benefit from knowing more about practising leadership. They are not always the formal leaders, nor do they always aspire to be, but they do have influence. At a given time, leaders and followers may change or blend roles' (p. 100). Moreover, teacher leadership might 'develop into a learner-to-learner relationship where participants serve as leaders and followers at different times depending on their expertise' (Lovett, 2018, p. 62).

Impact of teacher leadership

Similar to York-Barr and Duke (2004), several researchers have stressed the roles and responsibilities of teacher leaders which focus exclusively on the improvement of student learning and academic achievement, as well as on the improvement of school performance, rather than on leading. Thus, teacher leadership is essential in order to cope with the new changes teachers face in their profession, as well as to prepare students to deal with these new changes. Thus, teachers must expand their own abilities and assume greater leadership roles.

Consistent with the various definitions of teacher leadership, several researchers have identified different teacher leader roles (Akert & Martin, 2012; Frost & Harris, 2003; Griffiths-Prince, 2015; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). In some cases, a specific teacher leader role is expected whenever teacher leadership is mentioned; in others the expectation is that teachers who already enjoy a formal managerial role will be representing teacher leaders. A further category for teacher leaders' role is one that engages in the professional development of other teachers. A fourth category is simply leadership exercised by teachers regardless of position or designation.

This study agrees with the notion that every teacher can practise leadership (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Levin & Schrum, 2016). However, consistency is key. Thus, teachers who regularly practise leadership can be readily recognized as teacher leaders in their organizations for displaying a number of relevant characteristics. Being a role model and having moral purpose is important. Teachers influence teachers, students and other stakeholders directly and indirectly, through their views, attitudes, knowledge and activities (Katyal & Evers, 2004). For this reason, scholars unanimously agree that developing teacher leadership can bring positive change to the school, by converting the school into a place of adult professional learning as well as student learning (Schmerler et al., 2009).

Many authors (Frost & Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2006; York-Barr & Duke, 2004) have reviewed previous studies on teacher leaders' impact on school improvement, school effectiveness, and their influence on colleagues and students. They describe the positive impact and value of teacher leaders on students, peers, and stakeholders (Granville-Chapman, 2016). Thus, encouraging teacher leadership has both individual and organizational benefits that can influence student learning. For one, it offers individuals greater opportunities to learn from one another according to their own expertise, while also enabling the creation of a learning organization which capitalizes on multiple sources and experiences.

However, teacher leadership remains a contested concept. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) stated, 'although progress has been made in recognizing that the

principal's job is about creating a culture in which principals and teachers lead together, our experience is that this perspective is not widespread' (p. 84). Thus, despite the positive features that are attributed to teacher leadership by some researchers (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2014; Harris, 2005; Shumate, Muñoz, & Winter, 2005), the transition from teacher to teacher leader can lead to confusion, and even guilt as teachers let go of earlier role conceptions (Carver, 2016). As Carver (2016) confirms, 'in their efforts to act as leaders and influence change, teacher leaders report encountering resistance and isolation from their peers and even administrative leaders when they question the status quo, challenge existing practises, and assume authority beyond their classroom responsibilities' (p. 3). Other studies allude to the negative impact of teacher leadership at least as raising jealousy among peers (Leblanc & Shelton, 2012).

Factors that affect teacher leadership

Many researchers maintain that teacher leadership can be nurtured in a culture based on trust, support, and learning (Bangs & MacBeath, 2012; Charles, 2017; Frost, 2011; Meristo & Eisenschmidt, 2014; Mokhele, 2016; Shute, 2011). York-Barr and Duke (2004) clarify the main factors affecting teacher leadership, including a supportive principal and colleagues, time, resources, and professional development opportunities. Specifically, studies show that teacher leadership can only be successful if supported by school leadership (Angelle & DeHart, 2011; Harris & Muijs, 2003). Although teachers can practise leadership roles in all situations, it would be more successful and considered part of school culture if supported by principals and school leaders. Teachers who are given the opportunity to share in leading by the principal gain values and beliefs of democratic work for the benefit of the school (Angelle & DeHart, 2011). Specifically in changing school environments, where reform initiatives bombard teachers with *innovations* in teaching, teachers need schools that 'focus on flexibility and continuous improvement,' allowing them to adapt to and innovate accordingly (Berry, Smylie, & Fuller, 2008, p. 34).

The need for a supportive school culture has also been emphasized in the literature documenting student teachers' leadership development. In their study of perceptions of teacher leadership, Rogers and Scales (2013) found that student teachers had the potential to be teacher leaders, yet they were not always offered the opportunities to demonstrate their leadership skills beyond certain activities. They further emphasized the status of student teachers as 'guests' in the practicum schools, and consequently their leadership practises were largely dependent upon what was permitted by the school administration and cooperating teachers.

Teachers further require specialized training offered through university degrees or professional development programs in order to develop their leadership skills (Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012). Teacher leadership will be fostered through these specialized training by increasing participants' confidence, building expertise, and providing opportunities for increased responsibilities for schoolwide leadership. Several studies have documented graduate programs aimed at developing teachers' leadership knowledge, skills, and identities (Carver, 2016). However, there is a dearth in studies related to initial teacher preparation programs aimed at teacher leadership, its

conceptions, practises, and identity development (Bond, 2011; Reeves & Lowenhaupt, 2016; Rogers & Scales, 2013).

General comments from teachers on how they learn new roles by practicing them with a 'sink or swim' attitude raises the question about the effectiveness of current teacher preparation programs and professional development (Nasser, 2017; Nguyen & Hunter, 2018). Another concern pertains to whether teacher leadership training should even be part of teacher preparation programs. Rogers and Scales (2013) assert the necessity of reframing teacher leadership preparation 'in a developmentally appropriate and meaningful way for preservice teachers' (p.19). Evidently, the leadership views and practises of student teachers should not be compared against the capabilities of experienced teachers. Dunlap and Hansen-Thomas (2011) assert the potential of teacher preparation programs in offering concrete and explicitly targeted experiences that will have a positive influence on student teachers' perceptions of self in leadership roles. Bond (2011) further proposed a developmentally suitable model for integrating teacher leadership into initial teacher preparation programs. The model included an emphasis on student teachers' definitions of teacher leadership, origins, and theories, as well as acquiring knowledge of self and others as teacher leaders. Bond further elaborates on the skills and competencies that student teachers need to assume in both teaching and leading activities. However, he warns that many student teachers may be resistant to the idea of becoming teacher leaders at such an early phase in their careers. Consequently, university instructors are advised to 'introduce the idea, guide them to consider the possibility of leadership, and give them opportunities to develop leadership skills. The transformation will only occur when teacher preparation programs begin the process' (p. 10).

The current study thus aimed to explore the participation of six student teachers during the practicum experience and contribute to available research by understanding their perspectives concerning teacher leadership awareness and development. More specifically, it explored participants' perspectives before, during, and after their participation in the practicum experience during the last semester of their teacher preparation program in Qatar. The research questions guiding this study were:

- (1) How do student teachers' perceptions of teacher leadership change as a result of their participation in a practicum experience?
- (2) What personal and/or contextual factors influence their changing perceptions of teacher leadership as a result of their participation in a practicum experience?

Methodology

In this study, a qualitative research design was employed. The qualitative method is well-known as an effective method to investigate participants' perspectives of a phenomenon in a particular context. In this study, pre- and post-semi-structured interviews were conducted, and participants' weekly reflection journals were reviewed and analyzed. In addition to the qualitative instruments used in this study, the Teacher Leadership Readiness Scale (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009) was administered before and after the practicum experience to examine participants' awareness and understandings of teacher leadership.

Table 1. Participants' demographics.

Name	Age	Nationality
(1) (Haifa)	23	Palestine
(2) (Mary)	25	Yemen
(3) (Saly)	28	Qatar
(4) (Loura)	23	Yemen
(5) (Elma)	25	Qatar
(6) (Remi)	21	Yemen

^aall names are pseudonyms

Context and participants

The study was undertaken at the College of Education in Qatar, the only college in the country to prepare student teachers to teach the Qatari curriculum standards, and to offer the teacher licensing system to graduating student teachers. A major component of the four-year program includes a 12-week practicum experience during which student teachers become responsible for lesson planning, teaching, and working closely with students, their mentors and their university supervisors. An essential outcome of the practicum experience as specified in the university handbook is for student teachers to acquire leadership knowledge and skills that would ready them for their professional lives. For this reason, the practicum experience had a clear focus on definitions of teacher leadership, opportunities for practicing teacher leadership, and strategies for overcoming challenges to teacher leadership.

For the sake of ensuring a productive practicum experience for student teachers, the College of Education partners with government-funded schools in Qatar. These schools welcome student teachers according to their specialization in grade level and subject area. All student teachers are assigned mentor teachers who becomes responsible for supporting them in lesson planning and teaching activities, as well as introducing them to the school community, providing feedback, and coordinating with the university supervisors.

This study targeted student teachers in their final practicum course. The sample for this study consisted of six female student teachers who were studying the same subject and were completing their practicum experience at the same government-funded school level at the secondary level. The researchers used criterion sampling to avoid having many factors affecting the data collection process (Preissle & LeCompte, 1984). All participants were in their twenties; their age ranged between 21 and 28. Two were Qataris and the other four were from different Arab countries (See Table 1). All names are pseudonyms in this study.

Data collection

Before the practicum experience started, the participants were informed about the purpose and phases of the study. The Teacher Readiness Scale was completed before participants attended the weekly seminars. The use of this quantitative data collection instrument was for the sole purpose of triangulating the qualitative data collected through the pre- and post-interviews, and the weekly journals submitted by the participants throughout the practicum experience. The survey gathered data on

participants' interest in taking on leadership roles. Items on the survey further targeted student teachers' perceptions of knowledge, skills, and aptitudes toward leadership activities.

The pre- and post-interviews were used to facilitate data collection and allow further probing and questioning about participants' definitions of teacher leadership, their perceptions of teacher leaders' roles and responsibilities, and their beliefs in their own teacher leadership knowledge and skills. Additional questions pertaining to participants' experiences during the practicum, including contextual factors, were added to the post-interviews. The semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face in Arabic for 20–30 minutes each. The interviews were then transcribed and only quotes used in the body of the article were translated into English. We intended to analyze the original sayings of our participants in order to represent their perceptions accurately.

Throughout the practicum experience, participants submitted weekly reflective journals, which captured their teacher leadership activities and practises (if any). These journals were further complimented with weekly seminars, during which participants discussed topics related to teacher leadership, debated factors which either facilitated or inhibited teacher leadership practises, and examined their own evolving perceptions, attitudes, and views on teacher leadership. Participants were informed that their weekly reflection journals and discussions on leadership topics were additional requirements and were not part of the grading system. They all volunteered and were informed that they could withdraw anytime during the study.

Data analysis

The analysis of qualitative data is known as 'working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others' The constant comparative method was used with the main purpose of weaving out meaning from the raw data. Preliminary themes and categories were developed and used to identify patterns emerging from the data. The categories were coded and both researchers analyzed the data, discussing the themes and patterns. Quotes relevant to the categories were selected. Analysis of the qualitative data revealed clusters covering the following themes: 1) teacher leadership definition, 2) teacher leadership characteristics, 3) teacher leadership impact, 4) factors affecting teacher leadership, 5) teacher leadership identity, and 6) teacher leadership development opportunities.

The Teacher Leadership Readiness scale was used to assess student teachers' readiness for leadership (See Appendix). The items on the scale were calculated as mentioned in Katzenmeyer and Moller's (2009) scoring protocol, such that the number of times *Strongly Agree* was chosen were multiplied by two, added to the number of times *Agree* was chosen, then subtracting the number of times *Disagree* was chosen and *Strongly Disagree* multiplied by two (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). The results of the scale were compared before and after the practicum experience (See Table 2). If the result of the scale was between 35 and 50, this meant the participants' attitudes were consistent with teacher leadership values. If the score was between 20 and 34, this showed that the majority of their attitudes were related to teacher leadership values. If the result was between –5 and 19 some of their attitudes and beliefs were inconsistent

Table 2. Pre- and post-results on the teacher leadership readiness scale.

Participants	Pre-results	Post-results
(1) (Haifa)	37	30
(2) (Mary)	42	24
(3) (Saly)	41	45
(4) (Loura)	36	35
(5) (Elma)	34	16
(6) (Remi)	35	24

with teacher leadership values. And if the result was -6 or below, then few attitudes and values were related to teacher leadership (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009).

Results

This section presents the findings according to the themes emerging from the data and according to the research questions.

Defining teacher leadership

Student teachers started their practicum experience without a clear understanding of what leadership means and that was clear in their responses related to the definition of teacher leadership. All participants used terms like ‘control’, ‘guide’, and ‘give instructions’. One participant defined teacher leadership as ‘guiding the students and giving them instructions’ (Participant 1), and another mentioned ‘someone who directs and motivates students to be leaders’ (Participant 3). All participants stated that teacher leadership was about guiding and leading students in and outside of the classroom.

Their responses showed better understanding at the end of the practicum. Examples included ‘being responsible of a team even without a formal position’ (Participant 4), ‘being a role model and capable of facing difficulties, capable of quick control and to volunteer’ (Participant 2).

Moreover, their perspectives evolved during the practicum experience, one participant described her perspective toward teachers’ role as, ‘I saw the role of the teacher towards her students is to prepare the student to take responsibility to become a good citizen, active in the community, the teacher is a role model for her students’ (Participant 6). Another participant stated her definition of effective teacher or teacher leader, ‘I hope to become an effective teacher in class and school to be a perfect teacher and be a mother and sister to my students before I be their teacher, to be able to guide them, and respect their needs, and be calm in the classroom’ (Participant 4).

Teacher leadership characteristics

Regarding teacher leadership characteristics, participants focused on a few personal traits, such as being honest, social and capable of public speech, and having high self-esteem before starting the practicum. While after the practicum, they had different and practical examples, such as, ‘has time management, vision, the power of positive influence, dealing with pressures, that means he can adapt to the stress in life or

work' (Participant 2). Another participant noted that a teacher leader has 'flexibility and is able to notice the changes around him, and being modest' (Participant 3). A final participant described the teacher leader as 'being able to lead and build teams and convince others' (Participant 4).

In their reflective journals, participants focused on self-control and dealing with students, as one participant stated: 'there is nothing difficult to change when there is the real will to change, for example I was able to control myself in several positions because I really wanted to find out my behavior' (Participant 2). Another participant stated: 'I always repeat that the effective teacher is the one who learns from mistakes, and does not feel pessimism and frustration, optimism is always good, and I will also use new strategies effectively to make lessons more enjoyable for my students in the future, to break the barrier and boredom in the classroom' (Participant 3). Generally, participants focused on classroom management techniques to help them deal with students, as well as understanding their own dispositions and attitudes, and developing their teaching and learning strategies to engage students.

Teacher leadership impact

In the post interviews, all participants mentioned positive impact. For example, one participant stated that 'the activities will be more educational, and the students will benefit more from them' (Participant 1). Another participant commented, that 'teachers will volunteer in their departments and each department will offer different activities and develop their talents and solve the behavioral problems of the students. Teachers will be role models' (Participant 4). In stating the impact on other teachers and students, Participant 3 mentioned, 'teachers are influencing their colleagues around them, changing the student's behavior ... and create a productive school environment'

Generally, their comments showed positive impact on the students' academic achievement and behavior. However, one of the participants mentioned that teacher leadership could have both a positive and negative impact when she was interviewed at the end of the practicum, indicating that 'some teachers might feel jealous although he/she might have positive influence on others.' In the post interviews, participants focused on teacher leadership's impact on supporting teachers in their practises and raising their self-esteem and self-confidence.

Factors affecting teacher leadership

Regarding conditions that affect teacher leadership, all participants mentioned only two factors, i.e. verbal appraisal and support from school personal during the pre-interviews. While in the post-interviews, they gave more detailed answers. For example, one participant stated: 'the mentor teacher and the supervisor might support the student teacher not only in teaching and learning strategies, but also in life and personal issues and how to deal with real life situations' (Participant 2).

Several challenges were further mentioned in the pre-interviews, such as a possibility of rejecting the idea of teacher leadership, not knowing the schools' policies and instructions, not being qualified enough to teach and to deal with students, and

considering student teachers as unqualified and incapable of taking any leadership roles. On the contrary, participants did not mention any challenges in the post interviews, as one participant commented, 'teachers should be able to deal with any situation' (Participant 3).

Regarding principal's support, the participants did not have any substantial contact with the principal except on a few occasions. Participant 5 said, 'after our arrival, the principal met us to talk to us and welcome us; she explained to us all the rules and prohibitions in the school and updated us about the importance of the teacher's role.'

Teacher leadership identity

Participants' expectations about their practicum experience were different from what they had envisioned. Before the practicum, most of their expectations focused on social relationships with teachers, dealing with students, and learning teaching strategies. Throughout the practicum, their main learning experiences focused on classroom management, acquiring teaching strategies, and using educational technologies. The ultimate leadership experience for them was to lead the classroom and to take control of the planning, teaching, and content.

All participants were optimistic and had high expectations about their roles and their contributions as teachers and leaders before the practicum as documented in the pre-interview. Only one student teacher did not consider herself capable of becoming a teacher leader, though expecting to change her perceptions after visiting the school. Another participant elaborated that she was able to lead students, however she was not able to lead other adults who were older than she was. In the post-interview, this number increased to five participants, who stated that they did not consider themselves as teacher leaders. Only one participant elaborated on her abilities and confidence to lead, and she gave many examples from her experience.

Interestingly, their comments about themselves in their reflective journals did not show that they considered themselves as teachers either; they used 'in the future' to show what they would do as teachers. Participant 6 stated: 'as a teacher in the future, I must inform my students of the importance of planning for their studies and their future.' Only Participant 4 was able to describe her leadership practises stating that:

Educational leadership is a must have for every teacher to be successful. A teacher should be a positive leader and an example to be followed by students. Through my experience in this practicum, I discovered that I have the skills of leadership through the attitudes that I passed down to the students in the classroom and beyond. The successful teacher must be a leader, and able to lead the class and students for the better. My experience showed that teachers who enjoy management and leadership skills have better learning outcomes. For example, coming to class on time, being well- prepared and ready indicate leadership.

Teacher leadership development opportunities

In their reflective journals, they described many examples to show their progress even if they did not consider them as leadership practises. Participant 2 said, 'This week, I felt that I was the leader of my class and I was fully responsible for them, and this is one of

the positive developments I have seen in my life.’ Another participant showed how proud she was, ‘I have a sense of pride and trust in myself, because the purpose of my practicum experience is in front of my eyes. Now I am able to stand up in front of my students and explain my lessons and move from one strategy to the other, and utilize what I learned for the first time’ (Participant 4).

Remarkably, they noticed the changes in their practises throughout the practicum, although they were unable to consider these activities as leadership contributions. Participant 6 described how she volunteered many times and helped other teachers, ‘I volunteered to help my teacher because I felt she had many tasks.’ Another participant engaged in multiple learning opportunities, including workshops and seminars. A third participant arranged a meeting with the principal which helped her know more about the school’s policies and guidelines. While a fourth participant found department meetings to be most helpful for learning new strategies and planning lessons. Thus, the majority of their leadership activities were mostly within the realm of dealing with other adults, rather than their students.

Despite these initiatives, all participants were mostly concerned with the daily procedures of teaching, with a special emphasis on classroom management, dealing with disruptive student behaviors, using different teaching strategies and methods, and learning how to connect the content with real life practises. In the case of an unsupportive mentor teacher, one participant found the answers to her questions from research. She stated, ‘I decided to do research and study myself, along with the skills and experience gained by the university and field training, so that I have the information I can solve any obstacle that may face me later, and not to be frustrated or helpless to any problem.’ Research skills were further considered important by other participants, as one participant stated, ‘I learned the importance of searching previous studies to find solutions for any obstacle that may face the teacher.’

Despite the fact that the qualitative data revealed some examples of leadership practises which participants were engaged in, the Teacher Leadership Readiness scale showed interesting results. According to [Table 2](#), all post results had dropped for five participants, and only one participant’s results increased slightly. Participants explained that they had high expectations at the beginning of the practicum experience and their perspectives changed toward the end of the program. These results indicate that these high expectations were not met, and though they may have been ready at the beginning of the practicum, their experiences revealed realistic requirements. Another possibility may be that they became reluctant and unwilling to practise leadership.

Discussion

This study provides evidence about student teachers’ perspectives toward teacher leadership, and some of their leadership practises, despite the fact that they did not consider these practises as leadership. These results are consistent with previous studies, even though previous studies mostly included experienced teachers (Bond, 2011; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Findings regarding the definition of teacher leadership were consistent with previous studies showing no agreement on the definition of teacher leadership. However, participants showed that teacher leadership includes formal and informal roles, and

might be practised inside and outside the classroom (Sokol, Gozdek, & Figurska, 2015; Struyve, Meredith, & Gielen, 2014; Uribe-Flórez, Al-Rawashdeh, & Morales, 2014). Most of the characteristics mentioned highlighted the importance of self-esteem and dealing with adults. This is an important finding, as teacher preparation programs usually focus on child development and classroom management, and rarely provide training on how to deal with adults and teams (Burke et al., 2013; Reeves & Lowenhaupt, 2016).

Some of the practises implemented during the practicum experience, such as collaborative planning and volunteering to help other teachers, were not considered as leadership practises by participants which is also consistent with previous studies (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Interestingly, they agreed with the common perspective in the schools, in that student teachers are not 'real teachers'. In addition, the mentor teacher and some school leaders usually did not allow them to use school resources, as they were not working officially at the schools, such as having access to the internet. Rogers and Scales (2013) warned against the possibility of school constraints impeding student teachers' development as teacher leaders. This should not be used as a reason to remove teacher leadership from initial teacher preparation, on the contrary, this only means that 'professional development in teacher leadership will be required beyond the teacher preparation program' (Rogers & Scales, 2013, p.31).

Although one of the schools principals welcomed the student teachers and explained main policies and her expectations, student teachers felt that they needed further explanation and information. The factors mentioned by the student teachers including the principal's support, professional development, and school culture are all consistent with previous studies (Angelle, Nixon, Norton, & Niles, 2011; Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012). However, student teachers also mentioned the importance of supporting them in learning more about life and how to deal with stress and pressure, not only supporting them in teaching and learning strategies. Public speech and having social skills were also highlighted.

Developing teachers' leadership skills is a challenging endeavor. Many development programs might not be suitable for student teachers, and thus an opportunity exists during the practicum experience (Bond, 2011). In this study, participants gave examples of how they practised their teacher leader roles, despite a lack of awareness, and hence discovered the importance of changing and developing their practises. When one of the mentor teachers could not provide proper support, the student teacher overcame this lack of support through developing her research skills and findings solutions. These examples show the importance of providing various opportunities to help student teachers to understand their role and the context and to develop their skills. Whitaker (2018) revealed that 'reliable leadership training goes beyond the acquisition of skills for work experiences. It also models the intangible traits of the individual by changing attitudes, self-esteem and communication techniques' (p.1).

The previous findings regarding teacher leadership definition, impact and conditions are consistent with previous studies (Smylie & Eckert, 2017; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004), and are considered important in developing student teachers' readiness and awareness, as well as their acquisition of necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions as teacher leaders (Bond, 2011). The findings of the current study should be taken with the following limitations in mind.

First, the number of participants is quite small to claim any generalization from the results. However, having a small number of participants allowed for the nuanced understanding of their perceptions and experience, especially as they all conducted their practicum experience at the same school level. Second, the limited literature on teacher leadership at the initial preparation level casted doubt on the feasibility of developing teacher leadership skills at this level. While we believe, based on the research findings, that student teachers find it difficult to acquire a wholistic view of their practises as being leadership-oriented, however, they showed potential for future development as the seeds of teacher leadership can be cultivated before student teachers graduate (Holand, Eckert, & Allen, 2014).

Conclusion and implications

Despite the common assumptions that teachers learn teacher leadership by practicing, it is important to give foundations for student teachers about educational leadership and teacher leadership, especially in a context that continuously witnesses educational changes. Another important aspect is informing student teachers about the vision of their country and the context they are working in.

Providing sessions on self-esteem and finding the strength in each student teacher is very important to develop and enhance their 'non-cognitive' skills, such as communication, self-confidence and problem-solving as a cost-effective approach to increasing the quality and productivity of the workforce (Whitaker, 2018).

The study contributes to current literature by revealing the importance of beginning the development of teacher leaders at a time when they are still student teachers. This type of support can help teachers graduate with the readiness and awareness of teacher leadership in schools.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Rania Sawalhi, Ph.D. supervises student teachers in College of Education, Qatar University. Rania has several research publications and her research interests include in teacher leadership, educational leadership, women education. She is the Co-founder of Eduenterprise (non-profit organization) and launched new initiatives related to educational leadership coaching and design thinking in education sector.

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Appendix

Respond to the following statements in terms of how strongly you agree or disagree:	Strongly agree	Agree	No opinion	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. My work as a teacher is both meaningful and important.					
2. Individual teachers should be able to influence how other teachers think about, plan for, and conduct their work with students.					
3. Teachers should be recognized for trying new teaching strategies whether they succeed or fail.					
4. Teachers should decide on the best methods of meeting educational goals set by policymaking groups (e.g. school boards, state departments of education)					
5. I am willing to observe and provide feedback to fellow teachers.					
6. I would like to spend time discussing my values and beliefs about teaching with my colleagues.					
7. It is important to me to have the respect of the administrators and other teachers of my school.					
8. I would be willing to help a colleague who was having difficulty with his or her teaching.					
9. I can see the points of view of my colleagues, parents, and students.					
10. I would give my time to help select new faculty members for my school.					
11. I try to work as a facilitator of the work of students in my classroom and of colleagues in meetings at my school.					
12. Teachers working collaboratively should be able to influence practice in their schools.					
13. I can continue to serve as a classroom teacher and become a leader in my schools.					
14. I would give my time to help plan professional development activities at my school.					
15. My work contributes to the overall success of our school program.					
16. Mentoring teachers is part of my responsibility as a professional teacher.					
17. School faculty and university faculty can mutually benefit from working together.					
18. I would be willing to give my time to participate in making decisions about such things as instructional materials, allocation resources, student assignments, and organization of the school day.					
19. I value time spent working with my colleagues on curriculum and instructional matters.					
20. I am very effective with almost all my colleagues.					
21. I have knowledge, information, and skills that can help students be successful					
22. I recognize and value points of view that are different from mine.					
23. I am very effective with almost all my students					
24. I want to work in an environment where I am recognized and valued as a professional					