Master Teachers as Teacher Leaders: Evidence from Malaysia and the Philippines

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Abstract: The career paths of teachers in most countries lead to talented practitioners progressively reducing their classroom work to take on leadership and management responsibilities culminating in headship. Some education systems seek to keep good teachers in classrooms by offering alternative promoted posts, often described as master teachers. This article presents evidence of the role of master teacher in two under-published Asia-Pacific contexts: Malaysia and the Philippines. Drawing on interviews with master teachers, and their principals and colleagues, the article provides a picture of the activities and role relationships of these senior practitioners. The findings show that the master teacher role largely succeeds in keeping talented and ambitious teachers in the classroom, but there is only limited evidence of a wider impact on colleagues, schools and the education system.

Introduction

The descriptors used to define the field have changed from management to leadership during the past 25 years (Gunter 2004). While these changes may be partly semantic (Bush 2008), they also signal a shift in the practices of school principals and senior staff. Management is associated with positional leadership, where heads derive their authority from their formal role as the most senior professionals in schools. The hierarchy is the most important aspect of power and principals can decide whether and how to delegate responsibilities to other staff in a ‘top-down’ model. Similarly, patterns of accountability are vertical, with teachers and other employees being answerable to the next level in what is a bureaucratic model (Bush 2011).

This managerial approach has been criticised, and perhaps discredited, as slow and inflexible. Creativity and innovation are discouraged and participants are unable to contribute to decision-making. Teachers may be left to implement decisions made further up the hierarchy, within or outside the school, and their professional knowledge and discretion may be deployed only to decide how to implement, not whether to do so. The emphasis is often on adherence to procedure, which might be described as managerialism, rather than making professional judgements about what is best for students.

Leadership offers a different perspective, with its focus on influence rather than positional authority. This is a more fluid concept and leadership may emanate from any part of the organisation. The
hierarchy is less important than expertise in determining the locus of decision-making. Leadership may also reside in groups, as well as individuals, regardless of their formal status. Relationship patterns may be lateral as well as vertical and arise from informal activity as well as formal structures. Leadership may also be conceptualised as a shared activity (Crawford 2012) while management often relates to individual, and usually senior, roles. This has led to the popularity of distributed leadership (Gronn 2010; Harris 2010) and teacher leadership (Muijs & Harris 2007). However, evidence on how teacher leadership may be exercised is limited.

School career paths generally involve a gradual reduction in teaching and a parallel growth in leadership and management responsibilities (Bush 2010). In order to gain promotion, and to receive enhanced rewards, talented teachers reduce their classroom teaching loads and substitute school-wide responsibilities. While it is sensible to appoint principals, and senior and middle leaders, from the best teachers, the consequence is a loss of talented teachers from the classroom. This concern led to the development of alternative career paths, to enable good teachers to remain in the classroom and also to broaden their influence to include other classrooms, and perhaps also other schools, but with a clear focus on teaching and learning. The labels applied to such roles vary but they include ‘master teachers’ (Thompson, Ransdell & Rousseau 2004) and, in the English context, advanced skills teachers (Fuller, Goodwyn & Francis-Brophy 2013).

Malaysia and the Philippines are two countries that have introduced master teachers, but there is only limited evidence of how they operate and their effectiveness. This article reports parallel research, undertaken in both countries, which seeks to establish the activities of master teachers of science in secondary schools, and whether they have succeeded in maintaining a sharp focus on teaching and learning. The project sought to ascertain whether they can be regarded as teacher leaders and, if so, how they exert their influence. In particular, the research team examined several aspects of their work:

- their own classroom practice
- their work as a subject leader
- their whole-school role
- their role beyond their own school.

The research involved eight exploratory case studies in Malaysia, and seven in the Philippines. In both countries, interviews were conducted with master teachers, school principals and staff who interacted with the master teachers.

**The Malaysian Education Context**

The Malaysian education system is overseen by the Ministry of Education. It is the responsibility of the federal government to provide education, but each state has an education department to coordinate educational matters in its area. Teachers are appointed and promoted to various positions by the national Ministry within a very hierarchical system. The Ministry is also responsible for pre-service and in-service training of teachers and is the employer for all teachers.

The Malaysia Education Blueprint, published in 2013, foreshadows certain reforms and stresses that teaching is the foundation of any education system. It also repeats Barber & Moursheed’s (2007) view that ‘the quality of the school system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers’ (Ministry of Education 2103: 5-2). The Blueprint also mentions the master teachers’ programme, intended to provide pathways to improved career progression. Since its inception in 1994, 13,300 teachers have been designated as master teachers. These master teachers provide guidance to younger and less
experienced teachers and are perceived to be the ‘crème de la crème’ of the Malaysian teaching profession (Noraini, Azliza & Radha 2013).

**The Philippine Education Context**

The Philippine education system is underpinned by the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013. It increased the number of years of basic education from 10 years to 13 years, through the K-12 initiative. This comprises one year of kindergarten, six years of elementary education, four years of junior high school and two years of senior high school. It aims to produce graduates who are globally competitive, functionally literate and equipped with 21st century skills.

The master teacher concept was introduced in the Philippines in 1978. This provided a two-track system of career progression for teachers: school administration and classroom teachers. The classroom teacher’s route was enacted through the creation of master teacher positions, at four levels that match the salary grades of principals and assistant principals.

The formal expectations of master teachers are that:

- they should have regular teaching loads.
- they are expected to assist other teachers in the school or district in improving their competence
- they should take the lead in the preparation of instructional materials or perform such other functions assigned by the principal
- they may also be required to serve as demonstration teachers or teacher consultants in the school or the district.

The introduction of master teachers was intended to retain effective teachers in the classroom, but the poor performance of secondary schools has continued. There is no standard format to assess the performance of master teachers. There is also no process for addressing underperformance by master teachers. Finally, there is also little research on master teachers to guide policy decisions.

**Literature Review: Teacher Leadership**

There have been continuing efforts to consider the role of teacher leadership in the classroom context as a process of mutual influence and the sharing of professional practice. Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson & Hann (2002) say that teacher leadership is the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals and other members of the school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and outcomes. Frost (2008: 337) characterises teacher leadership as involving shared leadership, teachers’ leadership of development work, teachers’ knowledge building, and teachers’ voices. Coggins & McGovern (2014: 16) outline five key purposes of teacher leadership:

1. improving student outcomes
2. improving the access of high-need students to effective teachers
3. extending the careers of teachers looking for growth opportunities
4. expanding the influence of effective teachers on their peers
5. ensuring a role for teachers as leaders in policy developments affecting their practice.

Harrison & Killion (2007) refer to ten roles for teacher leaders, of which the first six are the most significant: resource provider, instructional specialist, curriculum specialist, classroom supporter, learning facilitator and mentor. Danielson (2006) makes an important distinction between formal
and informal teacher leadership roles. The former hold positions such as department chairs or master teachers (our emphasis). Informal teacher leaders emerge spontaneously and organically from the ranks of teachers. They have no positional authority and their influence arises from the respect of their peers. Muijs & Harris’s (2007: 961) research in three UK schools showed that:

Teacher leadership was characterised by a variety of formal and informal groupings, often facilitated by involvement in external programmes. Teacher leadership was seen to empower teachers, and contributed to school improvement through this empowerment and the spreading of good practice and initiatives generated by teachers.

Timperley (2005: 418) cautions that developing teacher leadership in ways that promote student achievement presents difficulties. Teacher leaders with high acceptability among their colleagues are not necessarily those with appropriate expertise. Conversely, the micro-politics within a school can reduce the acceptability of those who have the expertise. Stevenson (2012) argues that the interpretation of teacher leadership is managerialist in nature and inherently conservative. Muijs & Harris (2007: 126) conclude that ‘teacher leadership requires active steps to be taken to constitute leadership teams and provide teachers with leadership roles. A culture of trust and collaboration is essential, as is a shared vision of where the school needs to go, clear line management structures and strong leadership development programmes.’

Lambert (2003) comments that teacher leadership has been ‘shackled’ by archaic definitions of leadership and time-worn assumptions about who can lead. Similarly, Johnson & Donaldson (2007) found that teacher leaders often struggled because schools did not provide a professional framework or establish clear responsibilities to legitimise their work. Grant (2006: 519), following research in South Africa, argues that teacher leadership occurs at four levels: in the classroom, working with other teachers, as an influence on the school, and as a member of the wider community.

Helterbran (2008: 363) notes that teacher leadership ‘remains largely an academic topic and, even though inroads have been made, teacher leadership remains more a concept than an actuality’. The term is widely used but much of the focus has been on salary scales and career structures rather than the practice and philosophy of leadership, as also noted in the earlier discussion of master teachers in Malaysia and the Philippines. The research reported in this article contributes to the limited evidence on teacher leadership through its focus on master teachers. As noted above, while teacher leadership can be independent of formal roles, it may require the legitimacy conferred by titles such as ‘master teacher’ to make a reality of teacher leadership. However, Spillane & Healey (2010) caution that having a formally designated leadership role, while also working as a classroom teacher, is likely to constrain the time and effort leaders are able to devote to supporting their colleagues.

**Literature Review: Master Teachers**

The limited literature on master teachers focuses on subject pedagogy and the capacity of the master teacher to develop other teachers, on the approaches used to enliven effective teaching, and on the relationship between the use of the terms ‘master’ or ‘expert’ and status and salary rewards.

**International Research**

The concept of master teachers has grown from a wish to harness the skills of successful classroom teachers and to use these for both student and colleague development. Fuller et al. (2013: 463) trace the background to the status-based Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) grade in England, designed to reward successful teachers. Following research with 849 ASTs, they note that:
[G]rades that recognise and reward teaching excellence do contribute in important ways to a teachers’ professional identity via an increased sense of recognition, reward and job satisfaction . . . [and] it allows highly accomplished teachers to remain where they want to be and that is the classroom.

Utley, Basile & Rhodes (2003: 526), in work on the role of master teachers in co-coordinating personal and professional development at 31 primary school sites associated with Columbia University in the USA, note that research and enquiry was a successful means of fostering leadership, but they also stress the importance of effective liaison between the schools and higher education facilitators. Buskist (2004: 4), following in depth interviews with 20 students, suggests that master teachers focus on thinking processes and problem solving, with current subject content taught in an enthusiastic way. They show a ‘seemingly boundless’ interest in students and colleagues as co-workers.

Montecinos, Pino, Campos-Martinez, Dominguez & Carreno (2014: 290), reporting on interviews with five master teachers in Chile, point to tensions arising from contrasting views of professionalism. The members of the ‘Teachers of Teachers Network’ had to conceal their status as master teachers in order to work with others who were not ready to accept the perceived ‘imposed improvement’ arising from conventional professional development practices. This links to Stevenson’s (2012) view that teacher leadership may be seen as managerialism.

Concepts

There is some ambiguity about the use and meaning of overlapping terms in the limited literature currently available. ‘Expert teachers’ refer to those with pedagogic skills (Van Driel & Berry 2012: 28) whilst the term ‘master teacher’, despite its gendered terminology, builds on the skills of the expert teacher to contribute to the professional growth of others. This is shown in the development of Standards for Master Teachers in England (Department for Education 2011: 9-11), with their emphasis on knowledge, enhanced classroom performance, attention to outcomes, environmental awareness reflecting the ethos of the school, and professional confidence and awareness.

Thompson et al. (2004: 3) note that master teachers show pace, subject understanding, individual student awareness and effective communication, but were slow to develop constructivist approaches, and the observed lessons were all teacher led. This was also noted by Lim, Pagram & Nastiti (2009), in detailed work in four Indonesian schools. They contend that there should be a move from exam-driven to holistic education, from didactic to experiential development activities, and from hierarchic to collegial structures. They conclude that master teachers should be developed as ‘job-embedded, site based, needs-based, collaborative’ and sustainable (pp. 6-7).

Carolan & Guinn (2007: 45-46) stress that master teachers should have pedagogic approaches which involve offering personalised scaffolding, using flexible means to reach defined ends, mining subject-area expertise, and creating a caring classroom in which differences are seen as assets. These skills apply to both students and the development of colleagues, and Carolan & Guinn (2007) stress the need for teacher development, notably through mentoring and coaching. In work for the English National College for School Leadership (NCSL), now the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL), Patterson & Creasy (2005) suggest that leaders should create systems for the development of expert or master teachers at all levels, and equip all leaders in mentoring and coaching skills. Bundy, Walsh & Mongillo (2015: 67) report on interviews with six acknowledged teacher leaders in South Africa. They argue that aspects of emotional intelligence to promote self-perception and reflection are recognised requirements for successful leadership with peers.
Malaysian Research

There is very little research focusing directly on master teachers, although Bajunid (2004: 212) stresses the importance of training for school leaders. While the use of the term ‘master teacher’ is implied rather than overt, proposals for the introduction of new standards recognise ‘the development of tool kits and application of standards criteria, such as the ISO or other international standards criteria, to improve the performance of students, teachers, administrators and organisations and community accountability’.

Ibrahim, Haniem, Aziz & Nambiar (2013: 86) investigated the practices of three master teachers in secondary schools in Malaysia and noted the gains to students and staff in the use of international best practice. Mokshein, Ahmad & Vongalis-Macrow (2009: 28) give an overall view of teacher development and note that promotion is tied to salary progression rather than to evidence of teacher quality:

Under this fast track, an excellent subject teacher can be promoted to the highest grade category after only five years of service. This is special compensation beyond the normal track promotional practices of the profession, so that teachers’ pay scales and career paths are more comparable to other professions.

Boey (2010: 28) considers teacher empowerment and contends that a complex of social, psychological and structural inhibitors also limits professional development and pedagogic independence. Although not overt, the implication is that this inhibits master teacher policies and potential.

Philippine Research

As noted earlier, there is no evidence of empirical research in the Philippines, where master teacher concepts and practices are related to salary and promotion scales as shown in the conditions for employment (Philippine Department of Education 2012). Yamauchi & Parendekar (2014) show that adherence to these scales may inhibit student outcomes and teacher development.

Methodology and Methods

As noted above, research on master teachers in Malaysia and the Philippines is very limited. This led the researchers to adopt an exploratory case study approach, with eight case studies in Malaysia and seven in the Philippines. The Philippines-based researcher is also a curriculum supervisor for science, and the research team decided to focus on science master teachers as this would facilitate access to participants and their schools. Sampling involved a mix of cluster, purposive and opportunist approaches. The sample comprised schools in specific regions in both countries convenient for the researchers. Only schools with science master teachers were eligible for inclusion in the research and the final samples were chosen by the researchers.

The original intention was to conduct eight school-based case studies in each country but, in the sampled division in the Philippines, there were only seven science master teachers in post, so there was a 100% sample of eligible teachers. In Malaysia, the researcher focused on Perak, where she had previously been a school principal and was confident about securing access. Eight science master teachers were included, using cluster and opportunity sampling (Fogelman & Comber 2007).

In each school, interviews were conducted with the science master teacher, the school principal and one teacher within the master teacher’s department. This sample was chosen to ensure respondent triangulation (Bush 2012) and to facilitate cross-case analysis within and between the two countries. In the Philippines, the seven master teachers were located at four high schools.
The sample comprised 18 participants: seven master teachers, seven other teachers from the same departments and four principals (see Table 1).

Table 1: Philippines participants

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In Malaysia, the eight master teachers were drawn from eight secondary schools in the state of Perak. The sample comprised 24 participants: eight master teachers, eight principals and eight teachers (see Table 2).

Table 2: Malaysian participants

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<td>Principals</td>
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The interview guide was developed by the research team and used in both national contexts and in all 12 schools. The topics identified within a semi-structured approach were:

- How are master teachers selected?
- What is the role of master teachers in their own classrooms?
- What is the role of master teachers in other classrooms?
- What is the wider role of master teachers within the school?
- What is the role of master teachers beyond the school?
- What is the role of master teachers in curriculum development?
- How do master teachers impact on the work of other teachers?
- How, if at all, do master teachers impact on student outcomes?

**Master Teachers in Malaysia**

As noted above, the research team has data from eight Malaysian science master teachers, drawn from eight secondary schools in Perak. In each school, three people were interviewed: the science master teacher, the principal and another science teacher (see Table 2). This is a small sample but, given the limited previous research on master teachers in Malaysia, the findings still serve to fill a significant gap in our knowledge about this important role.
Selection of Master Teachers

Prospective master teachers need the support of their principals before submitting their applications to the district and, subsequently, to the state education office. The names of the short-listed candidates are forwarded to the Ministry of Education (MoE), where their appointments to master teacher positions are endorsed. The criteria, reported by all 24 participants, are that the candidates must have taught the subject for at least five years, have annual appraisal marks of not less than 80 per cent for the past three years, and be perceived to be passionate about teaching their subject. A majority (six) of the master teachers were interviewed, and their classroom teaching observed, by officers from the MoE, as part of the selection process.

The Role of Master Teachers in their Own Classrooms

All eight master teachers state that their main task in their own classroom is to help students pass their subjects in public exams, a view which is shared by the principals and other teachers. The master teachers all claim that they improve exam scores through innovative and creative teaching methods and good classroom management.

To improve pass rates for their subjects, master teachers devise various programmes to identify weak and strong students. These initiatives may overlap with programmes planned by the school senior assistant for academic affairs and lead to role ambiguity between the master teacher and the senior assistant. Such tensions were noted at School 1, where the master teacher is proactive and has acquired various skills through conferences, workshops and seminars. The principal has added to the tension by asking the master teacher to carry out some of the tasks that are usually part of the senior assistant’s work.

The teachers and principals agree that master teachers should be effective teachers in their own classroom, with strong subject knowledge, and equipped with innovative and creative ways of teaching to inspire students.

The Role of Master Teachers in Other Classrooms

All master teachers agree that their responsibility for improving their subject extends beyond their own classrooms to the whole school. However, their role in other classrooms is limited as they do not have formal authority vested in their positions and have to work through influence. Five of the master teachers feel intimidated by more experienced teachers and unable to exert their influence on them:

Some of the teachers here are so experienced and they can teach better than me…. They give tuition classes outside and they are famous … I don’t see how I can help these teachers in teaching chemistry. (MT3)

Although master teachers occupy senior positions, with high salaries, they do not have the authority to mandate teachers to follow certain practices, but have to focus on building good relationships to see their plans adopted by their fellow colleagues. Their work in other classrooms is achieved through indirect influence, not formal power:

I try to involve the other teachers in my programmes, but it is difficult because I do not have the authority to enforce it. It is on a voluntary basis. (MT5)

All master teachers report that they do not work directly with students from other classes. This is supported by Principal 1, who comments that ‘they cannot interfere with the ways lessons are
being taught by other teachers’. Master teachers are in an ambiguous position in relation to their colleagues. Their role is not to direct but to be diplomatic and exert subtle influence:

It is about giving face, especially to the older and more senior teachers who have been here for a long time. (Teacher 1)

The limited influence of master teachers is linked to teachers’ expectations of the hierarchy in a centralised system:

It is difficult for master teachers to work within the hierarchical set up of the school structure. People prefer that the instruction and ideas are from the top and not from the master teachers. The teachers expect leadership to be exercised by the senior management team, and not from someone like the master teacher, who does not have the authority and power like the senior management team. (Principal 1)

**The Wider Role of Master Teachers Within their Own School**

Although both teachers and principals believe that master teachers should be allotted duties related to their subject specialism, they also feel that master teachers should be given a heavier work load due to their higher pay and status. In all eight schools, master teachers bear heavier responsibilities as they are given positions such as heads of special committees and organising teacher professional development programmes. The master teachers feel that they should be given tasks that are more closely related to academic enhancement. However, they have not complained because they feel honoured at being appointed to responsible positions, as also reported by teachers and principals:

The master teacher must be given more responsibilities, after all she is getting a higher salary and there is a chance for her to go up the level that is equivalent to a principal. (Teacher 2)

She is the master teacher and she needs to be given a higher position because we must give her the respect. (Teacher 7)

Five master teachers report that they have been given the role of planning and implementing the teacher professional development programmes for the whole school. They also have additional administrative responsibilities:

She now works more closely with the senior management team in providing ideas and helping to implement the programmes that come with the ideas. The senior management team consults her more now. (Teacher 4)

Principal I stresses the link between pay and master teachers’ workload: ‘She needs to show that she works for the extra pay and the higher salary scale she is getting’. However, one master teacher (MT3) feels that the higher salary and status do not justify the imposition of these extra responsibilities.

**The Role of Master Teachers Beyond the School**

All eight master teachers reported that they are involved in helping the district and state educational offices in planning and implementing activities, for both students and teachers, with the objective of helping schools to improve their pass rates. Activities such as competitions, quizzes and talks on technique in answering exam questions are organised every year. The state educational office asks master teachers to help write modules for teachers to use with weaker students. They also prepare lesson plans for the teachers.
The eight master teachers accept this extra work because they feel that being involved at district and state levels adds to their prestige:

I am also the key reference point for other teachers in the district. I am given the authority as the master teacher for physics in the district and called upon to do such activities when they organize their academic programmes for the year. (MT1)

When they (district and state educational offices) need help I have to help. After all, I am given this position by them. (MT5)

However, when master teachers spend time carrying out projects outside the school, they may incur the wrath of other teachers:

She was always out of school doing work for the district and state education offices and often not in school. We have to do a lot of ‘relief classes’ for her when she is not around. (Teacher 2)

We have to take care of her classes in school while she takes care of other school’s students and teachers. (Teacher 4)

Principals have to accept that master teachers may be called out of their school to carry out district and state activities. They have no alternative:

I always comply with that directive … I will allow him to go and just show me the letter and sign the book for going out of the school. That is all I require him to do. (Principal 3)

Master teachers’ obligations at the district and state level affect their school work and could have adverse effects on student learning and school performance:

Master teachers were often away from school and, when they come back, they had to have extra classes to catch up with lost time to finish the syllabus. (Principal 2)

Normally this kind of work will take her three to five days away from school and, when she comes back, she has to make up for lost time. (Principal 4)

The absence of master teachers causes other teachers to be unhappy about carrying their workloads. This has led some principals to discourage their teachers from applying for master teacher posts.

The Role of Master Teachers in Curriculum Development

Malaysia has a national curriculum, which is developed by the Centre for Curriculum Development within the Ministry of Education. The curriculum is called the National Integrated Curriculum for secondary schools. Master teachers, like other teachers and principals, are not allowed to make any amendments to the curriculum:

I have no right to change the curriculum and we are required to use the curriculum that has been prepared and given to us by the MOE. (MT2)

It is the job of the principal, the senior assistant for academic affairs and the heads of department to make sure all teachers teach according to the syllabus provided by the MOE, nothing more and nothing less. (MT3)

Nobody can change the curriculum, not even the master teacher, even though she is an expert in the subject. This is a very centralised education system. (Teacher 5)

The standardised curriculum does not meet the needs of all students, so master teachers may be asked by the state education office to produce modules, lesson plans and teaching materials for teachers to teach students at different levels. However, the modules and lesson plans are linked
to the framework of the curriculum. Master teachers are asked to develop modules and teaching materials to address the limitations of the national curriculum.

**The Impact of Master Teachers on the Work of other Teachers**

The position of master teacher is a promoted post with a salary that matches that of senior management. However, to have an impact on the work of other teachers, the master teachers must have their respect. Their impact is greater among the younger, less experienced teachers (MT3). ‘They look upon her as an elder sister and they give her their respect by heeding her advice and directives’ (Principal 7). In contrast, underperforming master teachers are unlikely to gain respect:

> If the master teacher is not performing according to what is expected, [he will] not be respected or held in high regard by his colleagues. (Principal 3).

Creating an impact on the other teachers cannot be achieved through formal authority, but only through informal means such as being friendly, helpful and generous in sharing work and materials with them:

- I can only influence them by becoming a role model to them. I have to be friendly with the teachers if I want to have an impact on them. (MT6)
- Sometimes I get motivated watching her work. She inspires many of us by her inexhaustible energy and hard work. (Teacher 5)
- I see her impact on other teachers through her passion for the students and willingness to help them. (Principal 5)

**The Impact of Master Teachers on Student Outcomes**

Master teachers are perceived to be experts and should be able to make a positive impact on student outcomes, especially in their specialist subjects. However, the findings show that master teachers can make an impact on student outcomes only when students and teacher are in an environment that is conducive to learning.

The master teachers of three schools (5, 7 and 8) find it very difficult to make an impact on the students as there is a problem of high absenteeism among students and teachers. This is a school-wide problem and one that master teachers cannot handle at their level:

> This is a school level problem and the principal, together with the PTA, should work to solve this problem of attitude the community here has about education. (MT8)
> She has extra classes to help students but they don’t turn up. (Teacher 7)
> The teachers often are not here and she has to cancel many activities because teachers will last minute be on medical leave. (Teacher 7)

In five schools (1, 2, 3, 4 and 6), where there is a positive learning environment, the master teachers are able to carry out various programmes to improve their subject scores and enhance student outcomes. Teacher cooperation is also important for master teachers to have an impact on these outcomes. The impact is stronger if they develop other teachers:

> She also helps teachers to improve on quality of teaching. Good teachers mean good results. (Teacher 1)
> This is because we have a science master teacher and she develops other science teachers. (Teacher 4)
The master teacher can have a stronger impact on learning outcomes when they have the respect of their students:

He meant business and the students . . . respect him because they know if they follow what he tells them to do, they will get good results. (Teacher 6)

However, Principal 5 believes that the impact on students is wholly the master teacher’s responsibility:

I believe if she works hard and persists, the results will improve further. (Principal 5)

To have an impact on student outcomes, master teachers also need the support of senior staff, who hold formal power. The master teacher has no such power and this inhibits their impact:

Based on hierarchy, he is the lowest in rank and has no power over the teachers and students. He has to follow rules, policies and regulations formulated by the school management team. (Teacher 8)

A more positive position is noted at School 4, one of the best schools in the district:

The situation is good and I hope the students’ results stay good for years to come. The quality of teacher is important for that to happen. My master teacher helps in that sense. (Principal 4)

**Overview of the Malaysian Data**

The position of master teacher is a promoted post and it comes with a higher salary scale which could put a good master teacher at the same level as a principal. Although it is a ‘fast track’ to promotion, many teachers are not interested because of the additional workload. They have the same teaching load as other teachers but also have the responsibility of improving their own subjects within their own school, as well as at the district and state levels, and also take on school administrative roles unrelated to their specialism.

Master teachers do not have vested power and their activities depend on their influence and good relationships with teachers. The master teachers participating in this research faced two specific challenges. In good schools, with very well-established and senior teachers, master teachers might be perceived as lacking the experience or knowledge to influence them. It may be just as difficult to exert leadership among teachers who are not committed, and this may require the support of the principal and senior management team.

Malaysia has a national curriculum and even master teachers cannot make changes. However, the state education office may call upon master teachers to produce teaching materials for use with weaker students. The district education offices also enlist them to help with district-level activities. This may anger their colleagues who have to cover their classes. It also creates extra work for the master teachers, who have to provide the ‘missing’ lessons at a later time.

The evidence of master teachers’ impact on other teachers, and on student outcomes, is mixed but appears to depend on the level of support from the principal and the senior management team, as well as the master teachers’ interpersonal skills. However, master teachers in the case study schools seem to have achieved only modest success in improving classroom practice and learning outcomes. The duties they are allocated, unrelated to their specialist subject, appear to detract from their subject focus and from their potential to develop teachers and enhance student learning.
Master Teachers in the Philippines

As noted above, the research team has data from seven Philippine science master teachers. The sample was drawn from four schools, with two schools having one such teacher, two having two and one with three. This is a small sample but, given the lack of previous research on master teachers in this context, the findings still serve to fill a significant gap in our knowledge about this important role. As well as the seven master teachers, interviews were conducted with the four principals and with seven non-master teachers, one linked to each master teacher (see Table 1).

Selection of Master Teachers

Prospective master teachers submit an application and supporting documents, initially to the school selection committee, and then to the district and divisional selection committees. The district committee ranks applicants based on several criteria: curriculum development, organisation of in-service training, chairing special committees, community service, demonstration lessons, leadership potential and receipt of a meritorious award. The rankings are reviewed by the divisional selection committee, which makes the final decision. The process is widely understood and all 18 participants explained it in a similar way.

The Role of Master Teachers in their Own Classrooms

Despite their formal status, and being ‘technical experts in their area’ (CMT3), most (five) master teachers state that their classroom role is no different from other teachers. One (SMT2) adds that he must ensure that classroom and laboratory activities are congruent with student needs. Another (SMT1) appears to be disappointed that ‘master teachers are stuck in the classroom doing classroom instruction and ... managing laboratory activities’.

The principals confirm that they fulfil the same role as other teachers, but two add that they should also provide leadership for co-teachers:

They should be knowledgeable of the subject content, strategies and techniques necessary for giving technical assistance to their co-teachers. (PB)

Master teachers are the instructional facilitators in the classroom. They also serve as mentors for co-teachers. (PV)

Two of the principals confirm that their master teachers meet their expectations, but one declined to comment on this point and Principal S states that ‘some are doing what is expected of them’.

The teachers reiterate the expectation that master teachers should be effective teachers in their own classrooms and show mastery of relevant concepts. ‘I expect them to be outstanding in classroom management’ (ST2). Five of these teachers also confirm that master teacher classroom roles are the same as for other teachers. However, four of these teachers add that some master teachers do not fulfil the expectations of their role, and one (ST2) notes that ‘activities of master teachers are not monitored’. Another teacher is scathing about their work:

There are master teachers who come to work late, are lazy, and let students write on the board while the class copies. Most of them are old and non-computer literate. (CT3)

The implication of such comments is that master teachers may work harder to get the job than in performing the role well once appointed.
The Role of Master Teachers in Other Classrooms

Four of the master teachers say that there is no clear role for them in other science rooms and laboratories. CMT2 comments that she has no such role, ‘unless given instructions’, while VMT says ‘none, unless approached by another teacher’ and CMT1 notes that ‘assistance is given whenever approached. There is no definite schedule.’ Similarly, SMT2 reports that ‘I assist teachers especially when assigned as a trainer’. These responses all suggest a passive approach, but the other three master teachers all identify a range of activities, including technical assistance, coaching other teachers in terms of classroom delivery, conduct of laboratory activities and test construction (CMT3).

The principals generally paint a more positive picture of this aspect of master teachers’ work, pointing to technical assistance for teachers, coaching and mentoring, and monitoring curriculum implementation:

- They assist non-master teachers in improving teaching-learning processes as well as in conducting laboratory lessons. They also monitor ... curriculum implementation ... [and] help in checking assessment tools [used by] science teachers. (PB)
- Master teachers provide technical assistance to teachers in order to improve learning outcomes. (PV)
- [Master teachers] give technical assistance to other teachers in terms of classroom instruction and construction of test items. (PS)
- Master teachers coach and mentor other teachers about their teaching strategies and serve as a role model. (PC)

However, the teachers’ responses suggest that the role of master teachers in other science rooms is limited. Three of the seven participants answered ‘none’ to this question, while two were not able to provide meaningful replies: ‘not clear to me’ (CT1) and ‘not aware’ (BT). The other two largely confirm the principals’ perceptions:

- They render technical assistance to non-master teachers on teaching strategies, innovations, development of assessment tools, and improvisation of instructional materials. (ST1)
- They assist in the development of instructional materials and act as a demonstration teacher. (ST2)

Collectively, these data suggest a modest role for master teachers in other classrooms and in supporting other science teachers, contradicting the expectations in the literature. We will explore this issue in more detail later.

The Wider Role of Master Teachers in their Own Schools

Almost all the master teachers identify a wide range of additional responsibilities, which go well beyond their specialist curriculum and teacher development roles. They carry out general leadership and management activities, such as chairing school committees, but such roles are not confined to MTs and may be exercised by other teachers who do not hold such titles. Only one master teacher (CMT3) mentions a more specific role, that of helping colleagues in designing action research.

The principals largely confirm the accounts of the master teachers and all four state that master teachers are assigned committee chairing roles. Three (PB, PS and PV) mention that master teachers conduct research linked to school performance, while PC says that they ‘serve as demonstration
teachers’. Similarly, the teachers refer to the master teachers’ chairing roles and their wider responsibilities within the school. However, four of them stress that such roles may also be allocated to other teachers, suggesting that these functions are not specific to the master teacher role:

I am not a master teacher but I am assigned as a chairman and some master teachers are my members. (CT2)

Master teachers in our school have the same work as other teachers. A non-master teacher performs better than master teachers. A non-master teacher acts as officer-in-charge whenever the headteacher is out. (CT3)

These insights indicate that the wider work of master teachers in their schools is by no means confined to their specialist subject. In addition, it is clear that they may be no more likely than other teachers to exercise these wider leadership functions.

The Role of Master Teachers Beyond the School

The master teachers vary in the extent to which they are involved in activities outside their schools. Some of these relate to their specialist roles, notably preparing instructional materials, disseminating lesson plans and preparing action plans. These activities are not timetabled and appear to result from approaches from ‘higher authorities’ (CMT1) such as the education programme supervisor. Such activities may be ‘unofficial’ (VMT) and are not monitored (BMT). Master teachers may also be consulted by science teachers in other schools (SMT1 and SMT2). However, some activities are non-specific, including church and peace groups, and it is not clear how, if at all, these relate to their professional roles.

The principals largely confirm these activities. They note that master teachers have formal responsibilities in their district as trainers, demonstrators and facilitators in their specialist areas, but they do not work directly with teachers in other schools. They may also act as consultants for other schools or the district, but these are usually voluntary activities undertaken in their own time:

They serve as a link between school and community in implementing programmes and projects of the local government related to science [e.g. waste management]. (PB)

Most (four) of the teachers stated that master teachers had no role beyond their schools, but three were aware of their role in community activities. Two stated that they may assist teachers in other schools, but this seems to depend on invitations from district supervisors.

These findings suggest that there is no clear pattern of activity for master teachers outside their own schools. Much appears to depend on the initiative of local inspectors, who may or may not call upon master teachers to assist with local activities. The wider implication is that the role of master teacher is largely confined to their own schools.

The Role of Master Teachers in Curriculum Development

The Philippines operates a national curriculum and master teachers appear to have a limited role in curriculum development. Two master teachers (CMT1 and CMT2) say that they can modify curriculum activities, but only when ‘instructed’ by the supervisor. One claims to have some scope to modify the implementation of the curriculum, for example through changing activities to suit the needs of the students:

I design the syllabus for research in science and continuously improve it according to the results of my action research. I make minor modifications in the arrangement of lessons to suit the needs of the learners. (CMT3)
The principals are unanimous in confirming that the curriculum is fixed and disseminated to schools for delivery: ‘The role of the schools is to implement the curriculum’. However, two (PB and PC) add that master teachers can enrich the curriculum by modifying teaching strategies and by initiating projects and using action research to address learning difficulties. The teachers largely confirm that master teachers must adhere to the national curriculum, with limited scope for innovation except in respect of classroom activities.

**The Impact of Master Teachers on the Work of Other Teachers**

As noted above, the literature suggests that master teachers are expected to impact on the work of other teachers by passing on their expertise through mentoring, coaching or modelling. However, the Philippines data do not support such assumptions and the master teachers make very modest claims. One says that there is no impact, while two comment that their influence cannot be quantified. Significantly, two (BMT and VMT) add that no study has been undertaken to assess their impact. Four do offer specific examples of impact – influencing work ethics, boosting teacher morale and improving their teaching practice – but there appears to be no formal mechanism for assessing the effects of such initiatives.

Two principals (PB and PV) say that master teachers are role models for other teachers, while principal S comments that teachers ‘are motivated to work well’. The teachers appear to perceive little benefit from the master teachers. Three say that they do not impact at all on their work, while two simply comment that that master teachers ‘share their knowledge’. Two are more positive, with one (ST2) noting that they help to improve teaching competence and enhance leadership skills. Another explains the ways in which she has been helped:

> They helped me to improve my test construction skills as well as in modifying lab activities.
> They also suggested action research topics. (VT)

**The Impact of Master Teachers on Student Outcomes**

The master teachers make several claims about how they impact on student performance, for example in competitions. Three say that students of master teachers are expected to perform better than those of other teachers, but they acknowledge that there are no data to support this assumption and VMT acknowledges that improved student performance is ‘presumed because master teachers are considered to be experts’. There were some more specific examples, for example in respect of improved student performance in the National Achievement Test. One master teacher elaborates on her claims:

> Master teachers’ expertise added to teachers’ teaching competence, resulting in an improved performance level by students. Drop outs are minimised due to enhanced skills of teachers in simplifying lessons. (SMT1)

Two of the principals make specific claims about master teacher impact:

> Master teachers have greater influence on student outcomes. They seldom have students with failing grades in their class and drop out is minimised in their classes. (PB)
> ‘They improved performance in terms of science subjects. (PS)

Principal V is less specific, simply saying that master teachers are a ‘source of new ideas, innovation and a model for effective and efficient teaching’. Principal C is even more cautious, and normative, in noting that ‘it is expected that master teachers should have a higher achievement level as compared to other teachers’. 
Three of the teachers say that there is little impact and one (BT) comments that ‘the impact is the same as other teachers’. The other teachers offer a more positive assessment:

Enhanced teaching competence of master teachers results in a reduced dropout rate. (ST1)
Master teachers have trained teachers to become better at creating change although there is no concrete data to support this. Improved teaching ability will result in better student outcomes. (ST2)
Master teachers can simplify concepts and can explain it better, which is expected to result in higher student outcomes. (CT1)

The collective perceptions of the impact of master teachers are mixed and are not based on firm evidence. Significantly, even where claims of impact are made, they mostly relate to master teachers’ own classrooms and rarely relate to their influence on other teachers.

Overview of the Philippines Data

Although the data are limited, they provide some helpful insights into the work of master teachers in this under-researched context. The position of master teacher is sought after and a formal selection process is in place using clear national criteria, with the final decision being made at the divisional level. Master teachers are supposed to be exemplary teachers who demonstrate good practice within and beyond their own classrooms. In practice, however, their impact is limited by the plethora of additional administrative duties imposed on them and by variable levels of motivation to sustain the commitment shown when seeking the role after they have been appointed. Their roles beyond their own schools also appear to be limited, although the participating master teachers are involved in developing curricula and assessment strategies. It is also not clear whether they impact on student outcomes and, if they do, it relates to their own classes and not to their influence on other teachers. If the aim of the master teacher policy is to keep talented teachers in the classroom, some success has been achieved, but their wider impact appears to be modest.

Conclusion: Enacting Teacher Leadership in Malaysia and the Philippines

The data from Malaysia and the Philippines provide helpful new insights into the role of master teacher in these under-published contexts. In this section, we compare the findings from the two countries and link them to the existing literature.

Master Teachers’ Classroom Practice

Master teachers are assumed to be ‘expert’ professionals (Van Driel & Berry 2012) and their introduction in many national contexts reflects a wish to retain talented teachers in the classrooms as an alternative career pathway to the formal hierarchy that leads to reduced teaching time. As Fuller et al. (2013) note, it allows accomplished teachers to remain in the classroom. However, much depends on how such teachers are identified. In Malaysia, the selection criteria are that the candidates must have taught the subject for at least five years, have annual appraisal marks of not less than 80 per cent, and are perceived to be passionate about teaching the subjects. In the Philippines, applicants are judged on several factors: curriculum development, organisation of in-service training, chairing special committees, community service, demonstration lessons, leadership potential and receipt of a meritorious award. In both countries, these appear to be valid criteria but they do not guarantee that only ‘expert’ teachers are chosen and, in the Philippines, they seem to be largely independent of classroom performance.
Following their appointment, master teachers might be expected to demonstrate exemplary classroom practice, including subject understanding, individual student awareness and effective communication (Thompson et al. 2004), but the evidence in both countries is mixed. In Malaysia, the focus is narrow, linked to examination results. The master teachers all believe that they improve exam scores through innovative and creative teaching, but these are self-reported data and need to be treated with caution. The teachers and principals agree that master teachers should be effective teachers in their own classroom, with strong subject knowledge, and equipped with innovative and creative ways of teaching to inspire students, but these are normative comments and it is not clear whether the master teachers match these aspirations.

Despite their formal status as ‘technical experts’ (CMT3), most Philippine master teachers state that their classroom role is no different from other teachers, and one (SMT1) is disappointed that ‘master teachers are stuck in the classroom’. The principals confirm that they fulfil the same role as other teachers but also stress that they should have mastery of subject content (PB) and be instructional facilitators in the classroom (PV). In practice, however, some principals and a majority of teachers state that some master teachers do not fulfil these expectations.

The mixed evidence about the classroom performance of master teachers suggests that either the selection process is flawed or that master teachers may work harder to secure the job than in performing the role well once appointed.

Subject Leadership

Enacting the role of master teacher implies that they assume responsibility for subject development. This suggests working in classrooms and with teachers with the same subject specialism. Given that master teachers continue to teach their own classes, there is limited scope for them to have a direct impact on the classroom practice of their colleagues. Instead, they have to operate indirectly, through influence and higher order interpersonal skills. As Van Driel & Berry (2012) suggest, master teachers need to ‘contribute to the professional growth’ of other teachers.

In Malaysia, all the participating master teachers agree that their responsibility for improving their subject extends beyond their own classrooms to the whole school. However, their role in other classrooms is limited as they do not have formal authority vested in their positions and have to work through influence, a point also noted by Danielson (2006). Consequently, their work in other classrooms is achieved through indirect influence, not formal power, and they cannot ‘interfere’ in classroom teaching, as one principal noted. Their role is not to direct but to exert subtle influence on their colleagues. In practice, this means that their impact is greater on younger teachers and when they are respected by the other teachers. Being perceived as a role model is one way of generating such respect, as indicated in School 6. However, some teachers continue to resist what they might perceive to be ‘imposed improvement’, as noted by Montenicos et al. (2014) in Chile.

In the Philippines, there appears to be limited scope for master teachers to operate in other science rooms and laboratories, and their work with other teachers is largely responsive, providing assistance when asked to do so. The teachers also largely eschew the notion that master teachers help them with classroom practice. The principals generally paint a more positive picture of this aspect of master teachers’ work, pointing to technical assistance for teachers, coaching and mentoring, and monitoring curriculum implementation. This connects to Carolan & Guinn’s (2007) view that master teachers should be engaged in teacher development, notably through coaching and mentoring. However, there is no evidence that master teachers in either country are trained to develop these skills, as recommended by Patterson & Creasy (2005).
Whole-School Role

Master teachers in both countries have assumed, or been allocated, a range of whole-school roles, mostly unrelated to their specialist subjects. In Malaysia, these wider responsibilities comprise committee chairing roles, and professional development work, and these activities are deemed to be appropriate because master teachers have higher pay and status. However, this extra work might reduce their effectiveness as a subject specialist and leader. Spillane & Healey (2010) warn of the danger of ‘potentially competing responsibilities’ and there is clearly potential conflict between master teachers’ subject specialist roles and their more general work as school leaders.

Similarly, in the Philippines, most master teachers identify a wide range of additional responsibilities, such as chairing school committees, which go well beyond their specialist curriculum and teacher development roles. However, such roles may also be allocated to other teachers, suggesting that these functions are not specific to the master teacher role. In both countries, the wider work of master teachers in their schools is by no means confined to their specialist subject. This might be justified as a contribution to the overall aim of school improvement (Muijs & Harris 2007), or be seen as underutilising their specialist skills and knowledge.

Role Beyond their Own School

Much of the literature focuses on the internal school role of master teachers, with limited attention to external activities. This contrasts with the Malaysian data, which show that all participants are involved in district and state activities, notably in planning and implementing activities to help schools to improve their pass rates. The master teachers accepted this extra work because of the perceived prestige of doing so, but it creates problems at their own schools as other teachers have to cover their lessons, making it more difficult for master teachers to develop and sustain good relationships with their colleagues. Principals are also frustrated by this, but they have to comply with external directives in this highly centralised system. This has led some principals to discourage their teachers from applying for master teacher posts. This issue illustrates the challenges involved in balancing school and system priorities.

In the Philippines, master teachers’ external activity may relate to their specialist roles, notably preparing instructional materials, disseminating lesson plans and preparing action plans at the request of senior officials. Master teachers may also be consulted by science teachers in other schools. There is no clear pattern for this external work and it seems that their role is largely confined to their own schools.

Master Teachers as Teacher Leaders

Teacher leadership is perceived to be independent of formal roles, depending on influence rather than authority (Harris 2010), but Danielson (2006) shows that teacher leaders may be exercised by professionals holding formal roles as well as those without positional power. Johnson & Donaldson (2007) add that the latter group often struggled due to lack of legitimacy. Master teachers occupy the hinterland between formal and informal teacher leadership. In both Malaysia and the Philippines, their work is legitimised by their appointment to an established position with enhanced salary and status. However, they remain outside the hierarchy and have to build relationships, and earn respect, to exert their influence on colleagues, as also noted by Danielson (2006). It is clear that the advent of master teachers in both countries has succeeded in keeping talented and ambitious teachers in their classrooms, but their leadership role is patchy and depends on personal variables rather than school or system endorsement. The evidence from this cross-country study lends
support to Lambert’s (2003) view that teacher leadership has been ‘shackled’ by archaic definitions of leadership.

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