



The Beacon

A Publication of The Pennsylvania
School Study Council

Summer 2008

VOLUME 4, NUMBER 4

Teachers as Leaders: Exploring Teacher Leadership in Schools

Dipali Puri
The Pennsylvania State University

The research literature that exists surrounding educational leadership focuses on various leadership styles, models, theories, and best practices that are conducive to fostering a positive culture and climate in schools. My initial beliefs concerning school leadership focused on the notion that the role of a “school leader” belonged to the principal; teachers and students were his “followers”. Early on in my academic career, I adopted a definition of who a school leader was and what I thought he should look like through a narrow lens, one that had been shaped by stereotypes and my lack of knowledge surrounding school leadership.

My personal experiences with school leadership come from two perspectives, as a student and a teacher. As a student in grade school (K-12), I saw my principal as an authoritarian, someone who was there to make sure that all of the students were following the rules and the teachers were doing their job (teaching their students). I saw my principal as a disciplinarian, not recognizing the scope and degree of his interactions with teachers, school staff, community members, and other administrators in the school and district. The principal was an instructional leader, one who used his expert knowledge and power to lead.

As a teacher, I had very little contact with the administrators and principals in my school. I would only see my principal if there was an issue with a student or a concern about the classroom curriculum, in short, if there was a problem. As a new teacher, I was not proactive in my efforts to seek out my principal in the school and build a collaborative relationship. I was focused on my students and making it through my first few years of teaching. I believed that the principal was the leader of the school and as a teacher, I knew I was expected to follow his guidelines.

I do not have a background in administration or administrative leadership, but I am interested in the connection between schools, teaching, and leadership. Hoy and Hoy (2003) discuss the importance of school leaders recognizing that they, along with teachers, are also responsible for student learning, because this is the “fundamental” purpose of schooling. “Leadership in instructional matters should emerge freely from both the principal and teachers” (p. 2). As a beginning teacher, I did not realize that teachers could take on leadership roles in their classrooms. Through my course work, I was introduced to the idea of “teacher leadership” and “teachers as leaders” which ultimately became the area of interest for my research.

Editor:

Carly Ackley
The Pennsylvania State University

Editorial Board:

Bernard J. Badiali
The Pennsylvania State University

Dennis Baughman
Northeastern School District

Marilyn Begley
The Pennsylvania State University

Paul T. Begley
The Pennsylvania State University

William L. Boyd
The Pennsylvania State University

Susan C. Faircloth
The Pennsylvania State University

Debra M. Freedman
The Pennsylvania State University

Preston C. Green
The Pennsylvania State University

William T. Hartman
The Pennsylvania State University

Salvatore F. Luzio Sr.
Riverside School District

J. Daniel Marshall
The Pennsylvania State University

James F. Nolan
The Pennsylvania State University

Jillian Reese
The Pennsylvania State University

Kai A. Schafft
The Pennsylvania State University

Roger C. Shouse
The Pennsylvania State University

Jacqueline A. Stefkovich
The Pennsylvania State University

Iris M. Striedieck
The Pennsylvania State University

John W. Tippeconnic
The Pennsylvania State University

Angela Tzilkowski
The Pennsylvania State University

Statement of purpose

Principals and administrators are often considered the key players associated with school leadership in educational literature. As schools begin to undergo educational reforms, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), in order to meet the needs of their students, staff, and community members, teachers are assuming greater responsibilities by taking on leadership roles in their classrooms and schools. This change in school structure reflects the need for teachers to develop leadership skills to help improve the educational quality of the school, increase their sense of professionalism, and enhance student achievement (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999).

Methodology

This paper explores the literature that exists surrounding teacher leadership and what this means for students, teaching, and learning. I began my review of the research literature by reading articles focused on “teachers as leaders” and “teacher leadership”. In doing so, I came across a number of articles that did not specifically focus on teacher leadership but made reference to the topic. This information is included in the paper to support the ideas and questions raised.

Furthermore, it should be mentioned that I am currently an instructor for CI 495, a curriculum and instruction course for elementary education majors that is offered at Penn State University. This mid-level, pre-student teaching practicum is taken concurrently with methods of teaching courses. This field experience offers preservice teachers an opportunity to integrate the concepts, principles, theories, and models from the methods courses and apply this knowledge to the real world of the classroom. I spent some time during two of our seminar meetings to discuss teacher leadership with my students in order to find out how they felt about teachers as leaders. I was interested to hear what they had to say and have included their responses below.

Literature Review

This section of the paper explores education research and literature that focuses on teacher leadership and teacher leaders. The literature review is organized around five questions:

- What is teacher leadership?
- What do teacher leaders do in their leadership roles?
- What are the ways in which principals can foster teacher leadership?
- What are the challenges that teacher leaders face?
- What are preservice teachers' perceptions about teacher leadership?

I. What is Teacher Leadership?

The definition of teacher leadership is not clearly defined in the research literature, many authors who discuss teacher leadership in their research support teachers as leaders, but fail to provide a definition of the concept for their readers (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). It is important to examine the definitions that do exist in teacher leadership literature to provide a context for this paper and guide future research and study. Patterson and Patterson (2004) define a teacher leader as “someone who works with colleagues for the purpose of improving teaching and learning whether in a formal or informal capacity” (p. 74). These teachers take on leadership roles with the intent to enhance their teaching practices, provide guidance for their colleagues, and increase student learning.

Teachers who serve as leaders in their schools may inspire other teachers and staff members, acting as a catalyst to stimulate their professional growth. Wasley (1991) defines teacher leadership as “the ability to encourage colleagues to change, to do things they would not ordinarily consider without the leader” (p. 21). Teachers who have an influence on their colleagues are well liked and respected in their position, they have built collaborative relationships with the faculty through open communication and expertise in the education field.

Leithwood and Duke (1999) have identified six different types of leadership styles in their research, these include: instructional, transformational, moral, participative, managerial, and contingency or style. The two types of leadership that are closely associated with teacher leadership are instructional and participative.

Instructional leadership typically focuses on the behaviors of the teachers as they engage in activities directly affecting the growth of the students (p. 47).

Participative leadership stresses the decision making process of the group (p. 51).

Teachers who have an instructional leadership style tend to have an influence on school climate and culture. Participative leadership is grounded on the belief that teachers who exhibit this leadership style will increase the effectiveness of the school. Participative leadership promotes a democratic school culture. Both of these definitions can be applied to enhance the development and understanding of teacher leadership and teachers as leaders.

Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) define teacher leaders as “teachers who are leaders within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders, and influence others towards improved educational practice” (p. 17). They categorize teacher leadership into three distinct components, which include: leadership of students or other teachers, leadership of organizational tasks, and leadership through decision making and partnerships with school administrators, teachers, and staff members. These different categories define what teacher leaders do in their schools and the role that they play in

their leadership positions.

II. What Do Teacher Leaders Do in Their Leadership Roles?

The tasks and responsibilities that teacher leaders assume in their leadership positions have undergone a transformation in the past few years. Silva, Gilbert & Nolan (2000) describe the evolution of teacher leadership in three waves. During the first wave, teacher leaders took on formal leadership roles, where they focused on managing the efficiency of the school system. The second wave of teacher leadership focused on the instructional expertise of the teacher leaders. During this wave, teacher leaders served as curriculum leaders, staff developers, and mentors of new teachers. The third wave of teacher leadership is currently in the stages of development. Teacher leaders are gaining recognition as contributors to the creation of the climate and culture of schools; through their expertise about teaching and learning, teachers are becoming leaders.

A positive school culture and climate are critical for effective teaching and learning. Culture and climate are used to define the way the school environment feels, what it sounds like, and how it looks. Schein (1992) defines culture as “the basic assumptions and beliefs shared by members or a group or organization” (p. 354). Hoy and Hoy (2003) define climate as:

A general concept that refers to teachers’ perceptions of the school’s work environment; it is affected by the formal organization, informal organization, and politics, all of which, including climate, affect the motivation and behavior of teachers (p. 11).

Just as the school climate and culture have an influence on teacher behavior and motivation, teachers who are leaders, have an impact on learning and the school environment through their leadership roles.

Teacher leaders take on either formal or informal leadership roles within the school. Formal leadership roles include department chair or team leader; roles that are typically associated with duties that a principal or administrator would fulfill. Teachers who take on formal leadership roles may become master teachers, department heads, union representatives, or curriculum specialists. Teacher leaders may take on a full-time leadership position or continue to teach full-time while taking on individual leadership responsibilities (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Informal leadership roles include sharing new teaching techniques or management ideas, mentoring new or beginning teachers, acting as the leader of a new or developing school project, promoting the mission of the school, and increasing their professional development through workshops, conferences, and lectures (Wasley, 1991). Informal leadership roles also include teacher leaders focusing on school improvement and enhancement of student performance.

Teachers who assume leadership positions in their schools feel more comfortable if they have the support of their principal and/or administrator. As school leaders, principals serve as models for leadership. What are the ways in which principals can foster teacher leadership?

III. What Are the Ways in Which Principals Can Foster Teacher Leadership?

Teacher leadership does not develop in isolation; teachers are more motivated to take on leadership roles if they are working within a collaborative environment. Harris (2003) states that “schools need to build a climate of collaboration premised upon communication, sharing, and opportunities for teachers to work together” (p. 9). Principal support is a significant factor in determining whether a teacher will feel comfortable assuming a leadership role. Principals influence teacher leadership in their schools through their support and encouragement of teacher leaders. Leonard and Leonard (2003) state:

Principals will need to engender trust, be facilitators of decision-making, and provide support in the interest of developing a safe environment where members are encouraged to take responsibility and to be accountable (p. 138).

Teachers, who know that their principal trusts them, feel empowered to take on leadership roles.

Principals should move from an instructional and managerial leadership style to one that promotes and develops a community of leaders. School leaders must create a school culture and environment that is conducive to teacher leadership in order for it to flourish. Teachers should be given more responsibility as leaders so that they become a part of the decision making process in leadership roles. Most importantly, principals need to create opportunities for teachers to lead (Childs-Bowen, 2000).

Conley and Goldman (1994) use the term facilitative leadership to describe principals who lead without domination. Principals who exhibit this leadership style involve their teachers in the decision making process (through shared leadership), establish a school vision, and work together to enact change. They refer to Dunlap and Goldman’s (1991) explanation of facilitative power as a starting point for the definition of facilitative leadership, which they define as:

The behaviors that enhance the collective ability of a school to adapt, solve problems, and improve performance. Facilitative leadership includes behaviors that help the organization achieve goals that may be shared, negotiated, or complementary (p. 238).

Principals support teacher leaders through collaboration, positive reinforcement, and encouragement; they demonstrate that they trust their teachers to do a good job in their position. Principals can also discourage teachers from taking on leadership positions. Teachers are less likely to feel motivated to develop their leadership skills if they do not have the support and guidance of their principal. They may feel discouraged to assume a leadership position if they are subject to a traditional, authoritarian leadership

style, one that does not promote teacher participation (Birky, et al., 2006).

IV. What Are the Challenges That Teacher Leaders Face?

Although the concept of teacher leadership is gaining momentum in schools and recognition in educational research and literature, teacher leaders find themselves faced with difficulties. These challenges are often dictated by the status quo (Ackerman & Mackenzie, 2006). Teachers often find that they are isolated in their classrooms and may not have opportunities to work together to create a collaborative school culture and foster a community of teacher leaders.

Principals who have not adopted a collaborative leadership style and focus on managerial and instructional ways of leading and delegating tasks, impede the ability for teachers to assume leadership roles. Teacher leaders who do not have the support of their principals and push for what they believe in, taking leadership initiatives, may create tension in their school among faculty members. Ackerman and Mackenzie (2006) believe that:

Teacher leaders struggle for control, not power over their work lives. They stand up for what is near and dear to them, improving teaching and learning (p. 69).

Principals and school leaders who are not comfortable with the idea of teacher leadership will not be responsive to teachers who are passionate about breaking the status quo.

Teacher leadership may be inhibited by a lack of role definition and unclear expectations for responsibilities associated with leadership positions. This discrepancy occurs in both, formal and informal leadership roles causing confusion and uncertainty about expectations. Teachers also face time restraints, they do not have the time to allocate their energies to additional leadership duties and believe that they should focus on their students. Teacher leaders who take on responsibilities outside their scope of knowledge without significant support may experience a decrease in their motivation and willingness to continue developing their leadership skills (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999).

V. What are Preservice Teachers' Perceptions About Teacher Leadership?

Although there is not an adequate amount of information from my informal teacher leadership study with my preservice teachers to make significant contributions to the field of teachers as leaders and teacher leadership, I feel that it is important to highlight my initial findings in this paper as a stepping-stone that could shape future research, theories, and practice. Preservice teachers are the future teacher leaders of America, they will play a significant role in shaping education, teaching, and learning as they step into their classrooms. Recently there has been a push for teacher leaders to collaborate with preservice teacher education programs in order to bridge the gap between classrooms and higher education (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

In an effort to gauge how my students identified with the notion of teacher leaders, I facilitated a discussion revolving around teacher leadership during two seminar meetings this semester (Spring, 2007). I currently have seven students in my CI 495 cohort, all seven of my preservice teachers are pursuing their elementary education certifications. In order to provide a context for our teacher leadership discussion, we watched "The Education of Ms. Groves", a Dateline special that followed a first year African-American teacher's experiences in an urban school, her class was 99% African-American. The challenges Ms. Grove faced her first year teaching a highly diverse student population reflected the need for her to assume a leadership position in her classroom.

After we watched the video, I asked my students to share with the group their feelings about teachers and leadership, specifically, I wanted to know if they believed that they were teacher leaders in their classrooms. I received the following feedback from our discussion:

Three out of seven (approximately ½) of my students believe that they are teacher leaders in their classrooms.

Four out of seven (approximately ½) do not feel as if they are teacher leaders in their classrooms.

Responsibility was a factor in determining their answers: for example, preservice teachers who were given more teaching time, felt that this increased their leadership position in the classroom. Preservice teachers who were given a limited amount of teaching opportunities did not feel as if they were leaders in their classrooms.

Classroom management was a factor in determining their answers: preservice teachers who felt that they were able to manage learning and behavior in their classrooms, believed that they were teacher leaders. Preservice teachers who were still learning how to manage student behavior did not see themselves as teacher leaders.

The relationship that preservice teachers had established with their mentor teachers was a factor in determining their answers: preservice teachers who stated that they had a positive relationship with their mentor teacher felt that this contributed to their leadership role in their classrooms.

From this discussion with my preservice teachers and a critique of the information that was collected, I conclude that their responses and reactions to the concept of teacher leadership and teachers as leaders are based on the instructional duties, such as teaching and management, they are given in their classroom. Preservice teachers believe that they are assuming a leadership position in their classrooms when they have more opportunities to take on more teaching responsibilities, demonstrate effective classroom

management skills, and establish positive relationships with their mentor teachers and students.

Where Do We Go From Here?

It is evident that teacher leaders make a significant contribution to schools, teaching, and learning. The concept of teacher leadership is often discussed in relationship to existing models of school leadership, which focus primarily on principals and administrators. Due to the lack of a common definition for teacher leadership in the educational research and literature, there is a need for the development of a conceptual framework, in order to better understand what teacher leadership is and what it should look like (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Teachers are in direct contact with students in their classrooms, influencing their achievement and learning. One aspect of teacher leadership that is underrepresented in research literature is the relationship between teacher leadership and student performance. How does teacher leadership influence student performance? How do students respond to teacher leaders? What can principals do to foster the relationship between students and teacher leaders? What can schools do to make the link between student achievement and school goals? These questions can be used to guide future research studies and practices pertaining to teacher leadership, relationships, and school culture.

The lack of research that exists documenting what a teacher leader does in the classroom suggests a need for the study of leadership from the teacher leader's perspective (Birky, Shelton, & Headley, 2006). Teacher leaders should be given opportunities to reflect on their role in a leadership position and the ways in which they are contributing to the leadership in their schools. Teacher leaders who share their experiences with others and the impact they are having on their students, colleagues, and administrators may inspire future teacher leaders to take on leadership roles in their schools.

Research shows that teachers who are, or become leaders have instructional expertise, are well liked and respected by their peers, and have a number of years of teaching experience in the classroom (Snell & Swanson, 2000). The educational literature surrounding who a teacher leader is tends to focus on their character, teaching experience, and personality traits. How does culture play a role in who teacher leaders are? What influence does this have on leadership in the schools? How does it influence the relationships that they build with other teachers and administrators? In order to better understand *who* teacher leaders are, I feel it is important to take a look their cultural backgrounds as well.

Preservice teachers are the future teacher leaders in our schools. They work closely with their mentor or cooperating teachers in their classrooms, developing, enhancing, and practicing their teaching skills so that they can help their students achieve academically. Preservice teachers' perceptions of teacher leadership, teachers, and school leaders are shaped by their practicum experiences and the limited amount of time they spend in the classroom. Teacher education programs should provide preservice teachers with opportunities to study leadership so that they are better prepared to become teacher leaders in their future classrooms.

Conclusion

The concept of teacher leadership and teachers as leaders is not new to the field of education. It has started to receive more attention due to educational reforms such as No Child Left Behind, the need for school improvement, enhancement of teacher professional identity, and an increase in student achievement and learning. Furman (2003) states that "there is a major thrust to identify the links between leadership practice and student learning outcomes" (p. 6). Teachers are the ones in classrooms everyday, on the "front lines", interacting and guiding student instruction to ensure that learning is taking place.

Teachers lead by example and benefit from the support and guidance of their principals as models of school leadership. Principals play a significant role in the creation of a positive work environment, where teachers are encouraged to work together. Harris (2003) states that "schools need to build a climate of collaboration premised upon communication, sharing and opportunities to work together" (p. 9). Teachers, who are given opportunities to lead in a school culture that promotes collaboration and a sense of community, feel more comfortable in leadership positions.

Teachers play a pivotal role in education, they are considered experts in their classrooms who have a considerable amount of knowledge pertaining to teaching and learning. School leadership is no longer solely the responsibility of the principal. As teachers assume greater leadership positions in their schools, future research needs to focus on how teacher leadership is developed and the influence teacher leaders have on student achievement, school culture, and shared leadership.

References

- Ackerman, R., & Mackenzie, S. (2006). Uncovering Teacher Leadership. *Educational Leadership*, 63(8), 66-70.
- Ash, Ruth C & Persall, J Maurice. (2000, May). The principal as chief learning officer: Developing teacher leaders. National Association of Secondary School Principals. *NASSP Bulletin*, 84(616), 15-22.
- Barth, Roland. (2001). Teacher Leader. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 443-449.
- Birky, Virginia Davidhizar, Shelton, Marc & Headley, Scot. (2006, June). An Administrator's Challenge: Encouraging Teachers to Be Leaders. National Association of Secondary School Principals. *NASSP Bulletin*, 90(2), 87-101.
- Bowman, Richard. (2004). Teachers as Leaders. *The Clearing House*, 77(5), 187-189.
- Buckner, Kermit G & McDowelle, James O. (2000, May). Developing teacher leaders: Providing encouragement, opportunities, and

- support. National Association of Secondary School Principals. *NASSP Bulletin*, 84(616), 35-41.
- Childs Bowen, et al. (2000). Principals: Leaders of Leaders. *NASSP Bulletin*, 84(616), 27-34.
- Conley, D.T. & Goldman, Paul (1994) Ten propositions for facilitative leadership. Murphy, J. Seashore Louis, K. Reshaping the principalship. 237-264.
- Frost, D., & Durrant, J. (2003). Teacher Leadership: rationale, strategy and impact. *School Leadership & Management*, 23(2), 173.
- Furman, Gail (2004) Moral leadership and the ethic of community. *Values and Ethics in Educational Administration*. 2(1)1-8.
- Harris, A. (2003). Teacher Leadership as Distributed Leadership: heresy, fantasy or possibility?. *School Leadership & Management*, 23(3), 313.
- Katzenmeyer M. & Moller G. (2001). *Awakening the Sleeping Giant. Helping Teachers Develop as Leaders*. Thousand Oakes, CA: Corwin Press.
- Leithwood, K., Jantzi, D., & Steinbach, R. (1999) *Fostering teacher leadership. Changing leadership for changing times*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press. 115 - 133.
- Leonard, L.J., Leonard, P.E. (2003) Valuing schools as professional communities: Assessing the collaborative prescription. In Begley, P.T. & Johansson, O. (Eds) *The Ethical Dimensions of School Leadership*. Kluwer Press: Dordrecht.
- Snell, J. & Swanson J. (2000, April). *The Essential Knowledge and Skills of Teacher Leaders: A search for a conceptual framework*. Paper presented at annual meeting of the American Education Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
- Steel, C., & Craig, E. (2006). Reworking Industrial Models, Exploring Contemporary Ideas, And Fostering Teacher Leadership. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 87(9), 676-680.
- Webb,-P.-Taylor; Neumann,-Maureen; Jones,-Laura-C. (2004). Politics, School Improvement, and Social Justice: A Triadic Model of Teacher Leadership. *The Educational Forum*, 68(3) p. 254-62.
- York-Barr, Jennifer and Duke Karen. (2004). What Do We Know About Teacher Leadership? Findings From Two Decades of Scholarship. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(3), 255-316.
- Yukl, Gary (1994) Chapter 12: Transformational and cultural leadership. *Leadership in Organizations*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. 350 – 377

Editorial Objectives: The Beacon, as a publication of The Pennsylvania School Study Council, seeks to publish with emphasis on practitioner appeal regarding themes related to K-12 teaching, school leadership, and district administration.

Manuscript Requirements: All articles will be reviewed by the editor to determine their suitability for this publication. In addition, at least two additional reviewers will conduct blind reviews of submitted articles. You may submit attached articles electronically to Laura Walstad at ljw15@psu.edu. All electronic submissions must be identified in the subject line of the email as "Beacon Submission Request." Paper submissions will also be considered provided adherence to the following guidelines. Three copies of the manuscript should be submitted. Manuscripts should be double-spaced and leave wide margins. Manuscripts should not identify the author(s) of the work. A separate page should be included which provides the author(s)' details, including contact information (address and e-mail). In addition, an abstract of 100-150 words should be included, as well as up to six keywords, which identify the central subjects, addressed in the manuscript. Diagrams, tables, and figures should be kept at a minimum, appear in black and white, and follow the manuscript in numbered order corresponding to numbered placeholders in the text. References should appear in the following APA format.

The editor reserves the right to make changes to the manuscript to ensure that it conforms to the house style. Generally, manuscripts should be between 2,500 and 5,000 words in length. Prospective author(s) must include a statement which indicates they agree to the submission of the manuscript, and that the manuscript has not been published, and is not under consideration for publication, in part or in substance, elsewhere.

PUBLICATION DETAILS: The Beacon is an independent publication of The Pennsylvania School Study Council (www.ed.psu.edu/psse), which is dedicated to improving education by providing research information, professional development activities, and technical assistance, enabling members to meet current and future challenges.

EDITORIAL CONTACT INFORMATION: Address all papers, editorial correspondence, and subscription information requests to: Pennsylvania School Study Council, attn: Editor Laura Walstad, 200 Rackley Building, Department of Education Policy Studies, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania, 16802, United States of America. Tel. 814-865-0321 Fax 814-865-1480 E-mail: ljw15@psu.edu

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

The Pennsylvania State University is committed to the policy that all persons shall have equal access to programs, facilities, admission, and employment without regard to personal characteristics not related to ability, performance, or qualifications as determined by University policy or by state or federal authorities. It is the policy of the University to maintain an academic and work environment free of discrimination, including harassment. The Pennsylvania State University prohibits discrimination and harassment against any person because of age, ancestry, color, disability or handicap, national origin, race, religious creed, sex, sexual orientation, or veteran status. Discrimination or harassment against faculty, staff, or students will not be tolerated at The Pennsylvania State University. Direct all inquiries regarding the nondiscrimination policy to the Affirmative Action Director, The Pennsylvania State University, 328 Boucke Building, University Park, PA 16802-5901; Tel 814-865-4700/V, 814-863-1150/TTY. U.Ed. EDU 05-19