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Teacher Leaders: A Catalyst for Instructional Leadership

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Abstract

The concept of the principal as the sole instructional leader of a school is quickly changing. Substantial evidence from schools with successful instructional programs indicate this responsibility has been spread among many staff members. Teachers who have been trained in the functions of leadership, instruction, and student learning are becoming the norm in today's schools. These teachers become a part of the leadership team and assist the principal with the instructional leadership function. Teachers who possess leadership skills are making valuable contributions to the success of instructional programs. Fusing teacher leadership into the culture of schools can result in stronger instructional programs and improved student learning.

Teacher Leaders: A Catalyst for Instructional Leadership

Suggestions that principals should embody all the characteristics and skills that can lead to solving a myriad of problems and defects in the schools in which they work fill the literature of instructional leadership. Somewhere on this list one usually finds a reference to student performance and the improvement of the school's instructional programs among the many other tasks principals are asked to perform. Within this same body of literature one also finds many references to the skills and knowledge principals should possess to be successful instructional leaders.

The days of the principal as the only instructional leader in a school are essentially over. Most educational policy makers no longer believe that one administrator can serve as the instructional leader for the entire school without the substantial participation of other educators (Elmore, 2000; Lambert, 2002; Lambert, 1998; Lambert, Walker, Zimmerman, Cooper, Lambert, & Ford-Slack, 1995; Lambert, Collay, Dietz, Kent, & Richert, 1997; Olson, 2000; Poplin, 1994; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001).   In the knowledge intensive enterprise of teaching and learning there can be no success in performing the complex tasks required of leadership without widely distributing the responsibility for leadership among the many people in the organization prepared to handle these tasks (Elmore, 2000).

Today's educators are facing a new accountability, the standards-based movement, which is forcing the question of whether the principal has the knowledge and skills to perform this new

instructional leadership role without relying on additional sources of assistance. The standards-based movement localizes accountability for student learning to the individual school level rather than the district level. The responsibility for this accountability belongs to the school and the people who work in it. As a result, a basic premise of local governance of education has been undermined because of standards-based reform. It is clear that students learn largely as a consequence of what goes on in individual schools (Elmore, 2002).

In schools with a high capacity for leadership, learning and instructional leadership become fused into professional practice. Such schools possess important common features that guide their ways of work. Principals, teachers, parents, and students in these schools participate together as mutual learners and leaders in study groups, action research teams, vertical learning communities, and learning focused staff meetings. A shared vision results in program coherence. Participants reflect on their core values and weave those values into a shared vision to which all can commit themselves and members freely discuss how their instructional practice connects to the vision.   Inquiry-based use of information guides decisions and practices. Shared knowledge becomes the energy and guiding force for the school. Teachers, principals, students, and parents examine data to find answers and to pose new questions. Together they reflect, discuss, analyze, plan, and act. In such a setting roles and actions reflect broad involvement, collaboration, and collective responsibility. There is collaborative action throughout the school as a result of reflection, dialogue, and inquiry. This work results in a feeling that all share the responsibility for the learning of everyone in the school (Lambert, May 2002).

A practical approach to success in distributing instructional leadership is the development of teacher leaders to assist the principal with the monumental task of instructional improvement. If this approach is considered, several questions must be answered. What characteristics, skills

and knowledge should these teacher leaders possess and how should the teacher leader role be defined?

A review of the literature reveals several characteristics of teacher leaders.   Effective teacher leaders have the ability to communicate and persuade. They are frequently asked to present information concerning curriculum, testing, textbooks, and other issues to groups of parents, community members, and school boards (WestEd, 2003). Teacher leaders are frequently described as outgoing advocates for other teachers and prefer to handle encountered conflicts through persuasion rather than confrontation (Wilson, 1993). Teacher leaders listen to their colleagues and negotiate and mediate between teachers when necessary (Yarger & Lee, 1994).

Teacher leaders are credible experts. They are often selected because of the deep subject area knowledge they possess, their willingness to learn more, and their exceptional teaching skills (WestEd, 2003; Patterson & Patterson, 2004). Not only must teacher leaders have expertise, but they must be perceived by their colleagues as credible and legitimate (Feiler, Heritage, & Gallimore, 2000). Teacher leaders have greater influence when other teachers respect them for their personal and professional values (Patterson & Patterson, 2004).

Teacher leaders tend to be risk-oriented. They seek to challenge traditional norms and search for new and exciting programs (Wilson, 1993). Teacher leaders dispute the long established view that teaching is limited to an individual's classroom (Troen & Boles, 1994). Teacher leaders leave the safety of their classrooms to make a difference and by doing so place themselves at risk for failure or criticism (Barth, 2001).

Teacher leaders are role models for their students and often have a reputation for being hard and challenging. They also are the teachers who have students come back to them years

after graduation to share the influence and motivation the teachers had on the former students (Wilson, 1993). Not only are teacher leaders role models for students, they are also models for other teachers. Rowley (1999) reports that effective mentor teachers model their desire to be continuous learners by their openness to listen and learn from their colleagues, including beginning teachers. Mentors and other teacher leaders attend and lead staff development activities. They enroll in graduate classes. They read and write articles for professional journals. They share knowledge, ask questions, and provide assistance to colleagues in a professional manner (Rowley, 1999; Feiler, Heritage, & Gallimore, 2000; Troen & Boles, 1994). Through their actions teacher leaders model the way for others.

Teacher leaders offer hope and encouragement to others. They support their colleagues (Wilson, 1993) and communicate privately and publicly their beliefs that others can accomplish great things (Rowley, 1999). Teacher leaders value relationships with their colleagues, because like their colleagues, they work directly with students. Often they connect with fellow teachers in a way administrators cannot (Patterson & Patterson, 2004).

The roles and responsibilities of teacher leaders are as varied as the schools in which they serve. Smylie and Denny (1990) studied one school district where teacher leaders created their own job descriptions. District policy discouraged predetermined and specific responsibilities assigned by building level administrators to teacher leaders because doing so would go against their commitment to encourage and promote decision-making and professional judgment of teachers. When allowed to shape the role of teacher leader to individual teachers and schools, district administrators believe greater contributions can be made to each unique school setting.

Smylie and Denny (1990) examined a school district that employed the "Lead Teacher" concept. Teachers voluntarily apply for leadership positions. Peers and principals review

applications and conduct interviews. A district-wide committee made the final decision before

selected teachers were designated as "Lead Teachers." Selected teachers were allowed

occasional release time from their classrooms and were expected to conduct most of their added

responsibilities outside of class time. The district supplemented the teachers' salaries for

leadership activities. This model seems similar to other districts' selection of roles such as grade

or department chairpersons, school improvement team leaders and members, and other similar

tasks.

Teacher leaders who serve through formal roles frequently saw their responsibilities as

facilitators, enablers, helpers, and sources of support for other teachers (Smylie and Denny,

1990). They discouraged labels such as "administrator" and "evaluator."   Teacher leaders

assisted other teachers by providing knowledge and new ideas for classroom instruction as well

as emotional support to colleagues. They strive to not separate themselves from colleagues while

serving as liaison between teachers and administrators. Many teacher leaders believe that to be

labeled as "leaders" sets them apart from fellow teachers and diminishes their abilities to bring

about change (Wilson, 1993).

Teacher leaders may formally influence beginning teachers through mentoring programs

that draw on the expertise and knowledge of master teachers. By serving as mentors, teacher

leaders help shape the future of the teaching profession through advising, counseling, and

observing newcomers. In most cases, teachers receive supplements to their salaries for these

roles, thereby providing both intrinsic and extrinsic incentives for mentors (Hart, 1995). Serving

as teacher leaders and mentors to beginning teachers, veteran teachers have more opportunities to

influence and shape a school's culture and climate than short-term principals (Patterson &

Patterson, 2004).

Teacher leaders are actively involved in shared decision making. Duke, Showers, and Imber (1980) defined this responsibility as greater in scope than decisions related to classrooms but limited to school level rather than district level decisions. Others have found that teacher leaders seem to spend much more time working at the district level than at the school level they prefer (Smylie and Denny, 1990). School decisions in which teacher leaders share should include at least the areas of instructional coordination, curriculum development, staff development, evaluation, general school improvement, personnel, rules and discipline, general administration, and policy making (Duke, Showers, Imber 1980). Bacharach, Babnerger, Conley, and Bauer (1990) suggest teacher leaders should share in decisions related to budget development, classroom assignments and scheduling, grading policies, and facilities planning.

Teacher leaders often prefer situations in which leadership is shared and distributed among members of a group (Wilson, 1993). Group members and leaders are transient depending on what goals they are trying to accomplish. Elmore (2000) further advances the practice of distributed leadership. Teachers tend to specialize in particular areas and are better at doing some things than others. Principals encourage teachers to give and receive collegial advice as a way of acquiring knowledge. Professional talk among colleagues is essential to growth and development in schools where a collaborative culture exists (Moller & Katzenmeyer, 1996). Principals enhance skills and knowledge of their teachers and utilize them to improve the overall performance of their schools (Elmore, 2000).

Studies have been conducted that show high performing schools with high student achievement and few discipline dilemmas often have teachers who share in decision-making and leadership responsibilities (Barth, 2001). Hart (1995) also reported that improvements in student achievement can be expected as a result of increased teacher leadership activities.

When teachers are empowered, they tend to have higher morale. Teachers reported increased feelings of self-efficacy by knowing they have accomplished something they deem important (Duke, Showers, and Imber, 1980). They take ownership in seeing that the vision, mission, and goals of the school are realized (Barth, 2001; Duke, Showers, & Imber, 1980). Teachers conceded they are more likely to comply with decisions if they are involved in determining the outcomes of the decisions (Duke, Showers, and Imber, 1980). Teacher leaders help shape their own schools and, thereby, their own destinies as educators when they participate in leadership roles (Barth, 2001).

Not only do the teachers who are leaders benefit, their colleagues, principals, and students benefit as well. The instructional programs of their schools are better aligned and instructionally sound because of their input (Duke, Showers, and Imber, 1980). Smylie and Denny (1990) interviewed faculty members in schools where formal teacher leadership roles were established. Teachers who were not leaders identified benefits for their schools (65%), their districts (57%), and their personal professional growth (48%) as a result of having teacher leaders. They cited improved staff development activities and enhanced professionalism in their buildings. All teachers seemed to be rewarded and recognized more when teacher leaders existed (Smylie & Denny, 1990).

Principals also enjoy the benefits of teacher leadership. As Barth (2001) pointed out, principals have many wonderful resources available to them through community leaders, universities, parents, and system-level administrators, but the greatest assistance is right under the roof with their teachers. Teachers reported cooperation and collaboration improved between teachers and administrators as a result of teacher leader activities.

Barth (2001) noted effective principals don't work harder than less effective principals, they work smarter. They often work smarter by utilizing the greatest resources available to them: the expertise of their teachers. All too often, staff development consists of outside "experts" telling teachers how to improve their instructional practices (Moller & Katzenmeyer, 1996). Principals who take advantage of their own experts by empowering them and involving them in decision-making actually increase their own influence rather than diminish it. Such principals have the belief that when many lead, the school cannot lose. When principals empower their teachers and involve them in decision making, the principals' influence is actually increased rather than diminished (Troen & Boles, 1994). Principals must energize the human capitol within their school buildings in order to meet the challenges of today's society.

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