Distributed Leadership and the Culture of Schools:

Teacher Leaders' Strategies for Gaining Access to Classrooms

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Formal teacher leadership roles have become a standard component of education reform efforts designed to improve teaching and learning, especially in traditionally underserved districts. These school-based leadership positions, such as instructional coaches and coordinators, are intended to support teachers in changing their practice. The notion of teachers as leaders builds on the belief that, in addition to being the gatekeepers of instructional change, teachers have a situated perspective on teaching that may make them the logical leaders of changed practice. Yet, the culture of schools is widely understood to favor autonomy and egalitarianism, suggesting that classroom teachers may be resistant to leadership from their peers. Given teachers' lack of receptivity to change and peer leadership, teacher leaders as facilitators of instructional improvement face many obstacles. Currently, little is known about the strategies teacher leaders use to address those obstacles.

This study examines how 12 teacher leaders from five school districts negotiate access to classrooms and encourage instructional change in light of teacher resistance. Drawing from observations and interviews, the findings indicate that, in order to gain access to teachers, teacher leaders frequently compromise their instructional improvement objectives, limiting their work to instructional assistance and minimizing the amount of change expected of teachers. Further evidence suggests that administrative support for changed teaching practice can help teacher leaders gain access to the classroom and promote instructional improvement.

Teacher Leadership as an Instructional Reform Strategy

The development of formal teacher leadership roles has been fueled by research on instructional leadership. Much of this research has focused on the role of principals and their responsibility for establishing, sustaining, and monitoring a vision for reform (Firestone, 1996). Yet, even without the added responsibilities of instructional leadership, the principal is often overburdened with administrative tasks, decreasing the probability that the principal alone can perform all the necessary leadership functions (Donaldson, 2001; Fullan, 2001). Moreover, teachers have been perceived as especially important for instructional reform due to their close connections to the classroom and their subsequent ability to control implementation (Heller & Firestone, 1995). As a result, districts and schools are increasingly creating new positions that formally expand responsibility for instructional leadership beyond the individual school principal (Guiney, 2001; Neufeld & Roper, 2003; Poglinco et al., 2003).

Evidence supporting the potential usefulness of teacher leadership comes from research on effective professional development. Findings suggest that sustained and supported teacher training that occurs within the context of the school can lead to improved teaching (Cohen & Hill, 2001). This kind of professional development may be facilitated by the creation of formal, school-based teacher leadership roles designed to promote ongoing and context-specific instructional improvement.

The inherent leadership capacity of teachers is also recognized by distributed leadership theorists, who view leadership as an interactive practice rather than rigidly defined roles (Gronn, 2000; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). This perspective maintains that leadership occurs through the enactment of tasks and the interaction of school community members. Such a task-oriented interpretation of leadership draws on the notion of overlapping leadership functions (Firestone, 1996; Heller & Firestone, 1995) or leadership that is “stretched over” multiple leaders (Spillane et al., 2001). Moreover, the distributed leadership perspective imbues teachers with leadership capacity since teachers have an opportunity to interact and influence one another

regarding matters of instructional practice. Formal teacher leadership roles that are modeled on distributed leadership theory differ from early initiatives from the eighties and early nineties, which focused on individual job enhancement (Hart, 1995). Instead, new teacher leadership roles aim to promote collective, school-based, instruction-oriented leadership that can lead to improved teaching practice and, ultimately, increases in student learning (Smylie, Conley, & Marks, 2002).

These positive indications that teacher leadership can promote schoolwide instructional improvement are tempered by evidence from earlier initiatives suggesting that there are formidable challenges to teacher leadership (Hart, 1995). Studies of mentor teachers, career ladders, and master teachers cite the school culture and teacher resistance among the factors that can inhibit job performance (Hart, 1990; Smylie & Denny, 1990). Teaching has long been recognized as a highly individualized and autonomous profession (Lortie, 1975) and the culture of schooling has been described as slow to change (Cuban, 1990; Sarason, 1996; Tyack & Tobin, 1994). These factors combine to suggest that teacher leadership runs contrary to the culture of schools and the norms of teaching.

Thus understood, there is an inherent tension between teacher leadership theory and its potential benefits, and the culture of schools, which has proven resistant to peer leadership and instructional change. Despite this tension, schools and districts have been increasingly apt to allocate financial and human resources toward these expanded instructional leadership positions. Given these considerations, it would be useful to better understand how the teacher leadership role is enacted.

This project examines how teacher leaders cope with issues of teacher resistance, the strategies they develop to gain access to classrooms, and the consequences of those efforts. The study is premised on the notion that teacher leaders' access strategies set the foundation for subsequent interaction between the teacher leader and teacher. Access strategies are analyzed using the precepts of distributive leadership theory and with an eye toward the limitations and constraints cited in the literature on school culture. The findings have implications for the design of formal

distributed leadership roles as well as the development of educational policy aimed at promoting improved teaching and learning.

Methods

This investigation uses a comparative case study methodology (Creswell, 1998) to explore the leadership roles of 12 elementary-level teacher leaders—teachers released from teaching responsibilities to assist colleagues with instructional improvement. The data for this paper are drawn from a larger study of teacher leadership that involved 63 participants, including teacher leaders, classroom teachers, principals, and district-level supervisors. This paper uses a subset of that data, primarily interviews with teacher leaders, to focus on the strategies used by teacher leaders to gain access to classrooms. These data were collected during the spring of 2003. This section describes the sample selection, data collection procedures, data analysis and interpretation, as well as study limitations.

The Sample

Districts. Districts were sampled purposefully (Miles & Huberman, 1994) based on the existence of formal teacher leadership roles at the elementary level and with special attention to low socio-economic status districts. The relevance of socio-economic status stems from a number of factors. Foremost, low socio-economic districts are widely recognized as needing to improve the quality of their teaching force. These low performing districts may also be more apt to recognize the utility of teacher leadership positions. Moreover, low-income districts may present particular challenges, such as limited or unpredictable funding, that may complicate the implementation of teacher leadership roles.

District sample selection was done by referencing the 2001–2002 New Jersey Department of Education District Factor Grouping (DFG) System, a statistical index that uses census data to rank school districts according to socioeconomic status.[1] The scale ranges from A

[1] The District Factor Grouping System was created in 1975 and uses seven indices to reflect socioeconomic status: percent of population with no high-school diploma, percent with some

to J, with A being the lowest socioeconomic category. The sample for this study includes three A/B-level districts, one C/D-level district, and one G/H-level district (see Table 1). The districts are relatively small, ranging from 2,200 to 7,500 students, which reflects the average district's size for the state of New Jersey.

Teacher Leaders. For the purpose of this study, teacher leaders are defined as teachers who have been released from classroom responsibilities to work with colleagues on improving their instruction. These teacher leaders are considered nonsupervisory, school-level staff, distinct from instructional supervisors working at the district level or external change agents. To add constancy to the data, all of the teacher leaders participating in this study are working exclusively on math instructional improvement, except for two teacher leaders from one district who are responsible for science and literacy in addition to mathematics. Each of the five districts used a different title to refer to the math teacher leader, including specialist, helping teacher, coordinator, teacher trainer, and lead teacher. In this paper, the term math coordinator is used to refer to the role of the math teacher leader.

The teacher leader sample includes a range of work designs to maximize variation (Creswell, 1998) (see Table 2). Seven of the math coordinators worked exclusively at one school, three worked in two schools, and two shared responsibility for eight schools. With regards to curriculum, the math coordinators worked with math programs that ranged from minimally constructivist programs that incorporated some use of manipulatives, to fully constructivist math programs. In some cases, these programs were at the beginning stages of implementation, while others had been in place for several years. Other contextual factors that increased sample variation were the teacher leaders' years of experience, whether they were hired from within district or from out of district, and the extent of their math training.

Although all five of the districts reported instructional improvement as the goal of teacher

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college, occupation, population density, income, unemployment, poverty. Category intervals reflect a distance of one tenth between the lowest and highest scores (New Jersey Department of Education).

leadership initiatives, the enactment of the position varied by district, by school, and by individual. Some of the primary responsibilities included modeling lessons, leading grade-level meetings, providing materials, assisting with student discipline, and performing managerial tasks.

A representative sample of math coordinators was drawn from each of the five districts. Where there were three or fewer math coordinators in a district, all were invited to participate. In one district, which employed eleven math coordinators, three coordinators were selected at random (Patton, 2001).

Data Collection

Data were collected from each of the 12 math coordinators using three primary methods: a pre-observation interview, a day-long observation, and a post-observation interview. The interviews lasted 1 hour on average and were audiotaped and transcribed. A structured interview protocol with open-ended questions was used for both interviews. Questions for the pre-observation interview focused on the nature and scope of the coordinator's work, including responsibilities, types of interactions, ease of classroom access, and factors that support and constrain job performance. The observation was intended to capture the interactional processes that occur between the coordinator and the school faculty. During the observation, the researcher took detailed descriptive notes using a predetermined record-keeping guide that focused the observation. The second interview offered an opportunity to clarify and follow up on information that was revealed during the observation. This tri-fold method of data collection promoted saturation and triangulation of the data, lending to the validity of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The analytic procedures conformed to the recommendations of Miles and Huberman (1994). Designed as a cross-case analysis, this project compares the experiences of coordinators, looking for both similarities and differences in the strategies they use to negotiate classroom access and assist their colleagues in instructional improvement. Data matrices, memos, and

contact summary sheets helped provide a systematic format for organizing and analyzing data from all three sources. Interpretation of the data aimed to discern patterns among coordinators' experiences and to create a thematic narrative that illuminates the strategies that math coordinators use to negotiate classroom access and position themselves to be able to help teachers improve their practice.

Study Limitations

Limitations of the study include challenges to external reliability, particularly the degree to which study findings may be generalizable to other settings due to differences in situation and contextual conditions (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). Efforts to minimize this limitation include variation in sampling and clearly delineated research methods. Nevertheless, variations in context may limit the transferability of findings. A second limitation stems from the study's focus on access strategies as a factor in teacher leaders' job enactment. Other contextual components that may impact enactment are not explored here although it is understood that teacher leaders work in complex circumstances and that multiple factors may affect their job enactment. Finally, this study depicts a snapshot of teacher leaders' work. It does not present the kind of longitudinal data necessary to predict instructional outcomes. Rather, the data presented here offer insights into teacher leadership that have implications for its design and implementation.

Findings

The findings are divided into two sections. The first describes three strategies teacher leaders used to gain access to classrooms: developing relationships, engaging in nonthreatening leadership, and targeting subsets of teachers. The second section describes three ways that administrators—principals and district supervisors—can influence the teacher leader's access to classrooms: setting expectations for the faculty, supporting instructional change, and offering guidance to the teacher leaders.

Access Strategies

Teacher leaders' reports of limited access to teachers mirror findings from the literature on school culture, which indicate that the norms of teaching favor autonomy and egalitarianism

(Lortie, 1975). In this case, teachers' preference for autonomy caused them to resist assistance from the teacher leaders, decreasing teacher leaders' access to teachers. The difficulties teacher leaders faced in gaining access also suggest potential constraints to distributed leadership. If teacher leaders cannot gain access to teachers, they may be unable to promote the kind of shared instructional focus described by distributed leadership theorists as necessary to support instructional change. This section explores the problems teacher leaders faced in gaining access and how they responded to these challenges.

According to the teacher leaders participating in this study, gaining access to classrooms was the foremost challenge they faced in performing their job responsibilities. Without opportunities to interact with teachers, they were unable to effect change. Here, two teacher leaders describe their experiences with resistant teachers:

> I was getting really discouraged with the door getting closed in my face. [I would] walk in the teachers' room and the murmur would stop…so [I would] avoid them and [I would] tend to shy away and I kind of isolated myself…[I felt] like, ok, you've beat me up enough all week long, I'm not going to the lunch room to get really brutalized.

A similar view was expressed by another teacher leader:

> Coming into this position this year, coming into this school district, the first month I would actually have doors slammed in my face.…So I said, let me make it to December.…If I could get into some classrooms, if I could start building some relationships with some teachers so they could see the value of my position to their classroom. That was my goal through December, and I did it.

All 12 of the teacher leaders participating in this study reported having doors slammed in their faces, both literally and figuratively. Although there was variability in the level of resistance that teacher leaders faced—ranging from acute, vocal opposition to more passive resistance—all of the teacher leaders reported some degree of teacher resistance.

Two factors that appeared to exacerbate resistance were the failure of administrators to introduce the teacher leader to the teachers and the teachers' perception of the teacher leader as an "insider" or "outsider." The first factor, faculty introductions, was described by teacher leaders as an important symbolic gesture of support for teacher leadership as well as an opportunity to inform teachers about the purpose of teacher leadership. In some cases, teacher leaders were introduced by the principal at a faculty meeting or through a memo. These formal presentations were usually brief and provided limited information about the kinds of activities teacher leaders would perform. Other times, teachers received no information about this new role. As a result, teachers frequently misinterpreted the teacher leaders' role as a supervisory position that would include monitoring and evaluations. This misunderstanding created an atmosphere of mistrust. One teacher leader explained, "some of [the teachers] haven't given me a chance because in the beginning…they thought I was going to be in there spying on them…they really didn't understand my role." This lack of understanding made it difficult for teacher leaders to gain access to teachers' classrooms.

Another factor that complicated efforts at access was the teacher leader's "outsider" or "insider" status. Four of the 12 teacher leaders participating in this study had been hired from outside the district, while the others had been selected from among the teaching faculty. Sometimes, outsider status worked to the teacher leaders' benefit, enabling them to forge a relationship with no preconceived notions; but at least one math coordinator faced additional resistance. She explained, "It was foolish to hire someone new to the district to do this because [the teachers] have nothing to go on with my history. [The supervisors] put teachers in a strange position and [they] put me in a difficult position because [the teachers] didn't know what my purpose was." In some cases, having insider status proved equally challenging, limiting the teachers' view of the teacher leader as an expert, since they had formerly both worked as classroom teachers.

Despite differences in reported levels of access, all the teacher leaders indicated devising

strategies that would help them gain access to teachers and their classrooms. These strategies included developing relationships, engaging in nonthreatening leadership, and targeting subsets of teachers. Each of the three strategies will be discussed in turn.

Developing Relationships

The first strategy that teacher leaders employed to gain access to teachers' classrooms was to develop a relationship with the teachers. Teacher leaders described relationship development as a process of building trust as well as providing practical information about the teacher leadership role, including the kinds of tasks performed and the positive ways in which teacher leadership can impact instruction. Whether or not the teacher leaders were hired from within or from outside the district, all of them faced the challenge of building relationships based on their new role as peer leaders. To build relationships, teacher leaders actively sought opportunities to introduce themselves to the teachers and offer assistance. This was done through three primary means: explicit self-introduction, covert self-introduction, and introductions via a third party.

Explicit self-introduction. In order to introduce themselves, teacher leaders needed to find appropriate times and places to talk with teachers. Some teacher leaders did this by arranging introductory meetings. One math coordinator attended grade-level meetings where she explained her role and offered assistance. She said, "If you expect [the teachers] to call you first they won't. But if you're there with your little appointment book in your hand and you say, 'When would you like me to come in?', then…they book the appointment." This same teacher leader, who was responsible for visiting three schools, employed different strategies at her other two schools where grade-level meetings did not take place. At one school she sent memos letting teachers know when she would be in the building and suggesting lessons she would like to model. At the third school, she would introduce herself in the teachers' lounge. She explained, "I'll get to that school early and I'll sit in the faculty room and do some of my prep work and the teachers will see me there and they ask questions. [That way] I've gotten to speak to teachers whose classes I don't go into."

Covert self-introduction. Unlike the explicit introductions made by the aforementioned

teacher leader, some teacher leaders engaged in more covert efforts at introducing themselves to the faculty. One teacher leader explained that being visible is a big part of building a relationship with teachers. She said, "It's important to be seen in the schools, not only in the class but just being there so people can know who you are and what you do." Being seen was one way for teacher leaders to demonstrate to teachers that they take an interest in the school and its community members. One teacher leader, hired from outside the district, showed teachers her commitment by becoming involved in numerous school activities beyond her role as a teacher leader. She said,

> I also taught an after-school [science] program…because I needed to find a different venue to get in touch with teachers and have them see me as a peer.…I wanted them to see I wasn't just a math person pushing this program on them.… Sometimes [I] have to step away from the math because [the teachers] are so uncomfortable with it and I have to show them that I'm in this building for other things too. I'm a team player.

This teacher leader also assisted with school trips and projects, such as painting a mural in the cafeteria. These activities helped her form relationships with teachers that went beyond her role as the math coordinator and start to build trust.

Third-party introductions. Another way that teacher leaders built relationships with teachers was through third-party introductions via students and other teachers. With this method, teacher leaders relied upon the testament of others to gain access to resistant teachers. One math coordinator summed up this idea by saying, "If you get your foot in [the door] with one [teacher], the thought is they'll spread the word to the rest of the flock." Another teacher leader said that after doing a model lesson with one teacher, "another teacher will hear about it in the same grade level [and will say to me] 'I heard you did that lesson, I hear you did a wonderful lesson. Could you come do that for me?'" In this way, teachers influence one another to help the teacher leader gain access to classrooms.

Another form of third-party introductions is through students. One teacher leader commented, "The fact that I know every one of [the teacher's] students and that I have vested

time in her students has completely, completely changed her outlook on me." By interacting with students on the playground, in the hallway, and during lunch, this teacher leader was able to gain the trust of an initially resistant teacher. In some cases, students put pressure on their teachers to invite the teacher leader into the classroom after hearing about the interesting activities that other classes have done with the teacher leader.

Nonthreatening Leadership

In addition to building relationships, a second strategy for gaining access to classrooms was the use of nonthreatening leadership. This strategy was described by teacher leaders as an effort to change teachers' perception that teacher leadership positions are supervisory and evaluative. One way that teacher leaders did this was to reinforce their status as peers. Math coordinators stressed the importance of learning from their fellow teachers and tried to minimize their status as experts. One math coordinator described his relationship with the faculty by saying, "The staff understands that I'm not the be-all and end-all. I do the best I can. I take recommendations. I have days where I do something great [and] I have days where I don't; we talk about it." Being open to discussion and recommendations was an approach that many teacher leaders took. One teacher leader said to her faculty, "You've never had this before. You've probably always thought, gee, wouldn't it be nice to have somebody help…But now that you do, you don't know what it looks like or sounds like, and I don't either. So we're sort of going to grow it together…" Similarly, some teacher leaders were quick to recognize the grade-level expertise of the teachers and to concede their own more generalized knowledge. In some cases, teacher leaders asked teachers to "show me how," sometimes out of real need and sometimes merely as a way to gain access to classrooms.

Another way for teacher leaders to appear nonthreatening and less supervisory was to provide nonintrusive assistance—aimed more at helping teachers than changing their instruction. At one extreme, one teacher leader elected to stay out of the teachers' classrooms completely for several months. She explained, "The first half of the year I did not force myself in the classrooms…

[and] I've been accepted and teachers don't look at me as a threat…I think the fact that I wasn't on their backs the first week of school [helped]…" Other teacher leaders aimed to reduce the teachers' workload by helping them with bulletin boards, making photocopies, or running errands. One teacher leader explained,

> I…help the teachers get the materials that they need.…Sometimes I'm gathering material just to get the teachers to feel comfortable. I'll make their transparencies, which I feel I didn't go to school for six years to make transparencies, but [that's a way] to help them buy into [the math program].

Even though this teacher leader preferred to play a more active role, gathering materials was one way she could help reduce teachers' workload, gain their trust, and possibly encourage them to implement the math program.

In addition to helping with managerial tasks, many teacher leaders gained access to classrooms by offering to help with especially difficult lessons. Teachers were more willing to have the teacher leader visit their classroom during lessons that required data collection, multiple manipulatives, or a series of activities. In these instances, the teacher leader acted primarily as an "extra pair of hands." One math coordinator explained, "[The teachers] say, '…can you come in and help? I need an extra pair of hands.' And… if that's the way I can get into the classroom and I can work with the teacher [then] I'm willing to go in and be that extra pair of hands because that is a need." By providing nonthreatening assistance, this teacher leader was able to gain greater classroom access.

Targeting Subsets of Teachers

A third strategy that promoted teacher leaders' entry into classrooms was to target subsets of teachers rather than the entire faculty. Teacher leaders reported that, by limiting the number of teachers they aimed to assist, they were able to focus their efforts, making teacher leadership more effective, albeit, with smaller numbers of teachers. Most commonly, teacher leaders targeted those teachers they perceived as needing the most help, including new teachers, teachers

who had changed grade levels, and teachers in tested grades, where there was more pressure to improve instruction. In the words of one math coordinator, “My goal this year was to focus on those teachers who needed the most help.…I also had a goal to work with the fourth-grade class more because that’s the class that’s tested.” Teacher leaders hypothesized that these subsets of teachers would have a greater need for assistance and would therefore be more open to receiving help. In some cases, especially when teacher leaders were stretched across more than one school, this kind of targeting was a formal part of the teacher leaders’ job description.

In addition to targeting perceived high-needs teachers, some teacher leaders targeted teachers who were receptive to their work and avoided teachers who were resistant. This strategy enabled teacher leaders to conserve time and energy. One math coordinator who admitted to avoiding resistant teachers said, “That might be bad to say but I spent a lot of time with teachers last year trying to get everybody, resistant or not resistant. To make my job a little easier this year I [decided to] focus on those [teachers] who really wanted my help…” Although this teacher leader suggests it might be “bad” to target receptive teachers, she used this as a strategy to help make her job more manageable. Another math coordinator echoed this idea, saying,

> Last year I tried to give each and every teacher a [model lesson].…[This year] I have been supporting those teachers who have been truly implementing [the math program].…Not to say that I’m not going to provide support to those teachers who are not implementing it, but I’m not going to make it my focus.

Both of these math coordinators had attempted to work with the entire faculty population the year before. Thus, their focus on receptive teachers was a new strategy they were employing to help minimize time spent on resistant teachers.

These three strategies—developing relationships, engaging in nonthreatening leadership, and targeting subsets of teachers—were frequently used in combination to maximize teacher leaders’ access to classrooms. No single strategy was reported to be a cure-all remedy and many teacher leaders indicated that, although the strategies were useful, they continued to experience

some difficulties gaining access to certain teachers. Nevertheless, the teacher leaders in this study perceived these strategies as effective means to promote overall access to classrooms, to enable them to perform their jobs, and to increase support for teachers. All of the teacher leaders were satisfied with their own job performance, and none questioned whether the support they provided to teachers lead to instructional improvement.

Administrator Influence

In discussing the strategies they used to access classrooms, all of the teacher leaders indicated that their principal or district-level supervisor influenced their job enactment. Specifically, teacher leaders reported that the level of support they received from administrators directly impacted their ability to access classrooms and implement the teacher leadership position as intended. Although most of the teacher leaders were able to describe occasions when they had received support from their principal or supervisor, four of the teacher leaders indicated a complete absence of support and all twelve of the teacher leaders reported a need for additional administrative support.

Teacher leaders' need for additional support from school and district administrators appears to corroborate the principles of distributed leadership theory. Thus understood, leadership occurs through interaction and influence and is characterized by overlapping leadership functions (Heller & Firestone, 1995; Spillane et al., 2001). This underscores the importance of continued interaction between school members engaged in instructional leadership and, more specifically, administrative support for teacher leadership.

According to the teacher leaders, a lack of sufficient support translated into teachers' misunderstanding of the role, decreased access to classrooms, and limited instructional change. Teacher leaders suggested that administrators could improve their level of support in three primary ways: set expectations for the faculty, support instructional change, and offer guidance to the teacher leaders. Each of these components is discussed here.

Set Expectations

Setting expectations for the faculty, with regard to the teacher leader role, was a key component in the teacher leaders' ability to access classrooms. Teacher leaders stated that, in most cases, administrative personnel failed to communicate to teachers the math coordinators' job responsibilities and how the coordinators would interact with teachers. According to one math coordinator, "[The administration] never once sat down with the teachers and explained what our position was or explained to [teachers]…how we can help them." When teachers didn't understand the work of the teacher leader, it increased their resistance. A math coordinator from another district said,

> It would be nice if the principals indicated to all staff that this is a priority and [teachers] should take advantage of the services. That would be a wonderful way to start the year…to say, "We have these people on staff and they will be available. We'll arrange for you to meet them and if there's anything you need them to do, feel free to contact them." That would be good. That would be very good.

Without an indication from the principal that the teachers are expected to work with the teacher leaders, the teacher leaders must spend additional time introducing themselves and establishing their position.

Conversely, when the principal or district-level supervisor actively sets expectations for teachers with regard to the teacher leaders' responsibilities and the kinds of interactions that should occur, the math coordinators reported decreased levels of resistance from teachers. One math coordinator explained the impact of this kind of support, saying,

> Our principal is very hands-on, she follows through, she reads plans, and everything's black or white. So we don't have the issue of people trying to skirt [math coordinator visits]…they're gonna do it, it's the way it is, so we don't have to deal with that issue and I think that makes my life a lot easier.…The guidelines

are clear, the expectations are clear, and there's follow-through.

In this case, the principal has set clear expectations about the teacher leader's role, including the expectation that teachers will interact with the teacher leader. As a result, the teacher leader indicates that his job is easier than if he didn't receive support from the principal.

Support Instructional Change

Another way that principals can support the work of teacher leaders is to support teacher leaders' efforts at promoting instructional change. Math coordinators expressed a desire for their principals to communicate instructional expectations to teachers and then follow up with classroom visitations and instructional monitoring. One math coordinator said, "I love our principal, [but] sometimes we need him to stand firmer on decisions and follow through…" Another teacher leader explained,

> It's very hard to make changes unless you have the principals behind you saying, "We want to see this," and that's a problem.…[We] need principals who say [to the teachers], "I want you working with so-and-so, I want to see this in your lesson plans, and I want to see this when I go to observe you or when I walk in the classroom." It makes a big difference.

According to this math coordinator, when principals are active in advocating instructional improvement, teachers are more likely to see the teacher leader as a useful resource. This same math coordinator described how teachers' receptivity can change when principals get involved: "[I've had] situations where [the teachers] correct papers while you're [modeling]…they think that it's a free period. So [the amount of teacher involvement] depends on the pressure that the administration puts on them."

When administrators exercise their role as evaluators and pressure teachers to improve their instruction, teachers perceive the teacher leader as less of a threat and more as a resource to help them meet their supervisors' demands. One teacher leader who received this kind of support explained,

> There were times when [I met] resistance and then I've said, "[The math supervisors] are going to come in and you're going be called on the carpet." So, I had something else that I could apply the pressure with, but it wasn't me.…That's one nice thing about being in this position, I can always say, "the supervisor or the principal," and they can be the heavy.

Relying on administrators to be "the heavy" enabled teacher leaders to promote themselves as resources who can assist with instructional change.

Offer Guidance

Math coordinators also indicated that it was helpful to meet with school administrators and to receive guidance with regard to the execution of their roles, although very few teacher leaders reported receiving this kind of support. In some cases, the lack of guidance was seen as a mixed blessing. One teacher leader explained, "The good news/bad news is, I have no guidelines and I'm very autonomous and I get to do what I think is the best thing to do and I love that about it. The negative is that I don't have any guidelines, no one's helping me saying 'Yes, you should do this' or 'You shouldn't'." As suggested by this math coordinator, high levels of independence often mean that the teacher leader is left alone to interpret the design of the position. Although most math coordinators reported that they would welcome more guidance from their principals, two math coordinators from one district indicated that they prefer not to meet with the principals. This lack of interaction was considered a way of minimizing teachers' perceptions of the teacher leaders as administrative spies. Aside from these two teacher leaders, the others saw administrative guidance as a potential resource that could promote teacher leaders' access to teachers.

When principals and supervisors did interact with teacher leaders, they did so usually to receive information rather than to offer guidance. As one math coordinator explained, "It's more me talking to [the principal]; it's not really her giving me feedback; it's more me saying these are the things that are being done." Such interactions, in which teacher leaders inform principals,

were commonly reported. Much less common were interactions in which the principal offered guidance. The rarity of these kinds of interactions is explained by another math coordinator who is responsible for visiting multiple schools. She says,

> In one school in particular, the principal will say to me, "I would like you to work with so-and-so on such-and-such." It's rare;…most of the time it's who is willing to have me come in the room and work with them.

As this math coordinator explains, administrators seldom offer guidance about who to work with and what topics to address, subsequently limiting the range of teachers who are willing to have the math coordinator in their classroom.

Reports from teacher leaders indicate that these three administrator functions—setting expectations for the faculty, supporting instructional change, and offering guidance to the teacher leaders—were useful for increasing teacher leaders' access to classrooms. Although teacher leaders reported administrator support as an important factor in their job performance, administrators' capacity to provide support may be limited by multiple contextual constraints including school organization, teacher leadership design, and community socioeconomic status.

Discussion

Reports from the teacher leaders participating in this study suggest that an isolationist culture of schooling continues to predominate, inhibiting the acceptance of teacher leadership as a means of instructional improvement. Instead of recognizing teacher leadership as a valuable resource and inviting teacher leaders into their classrooms, teachers proved resistant to peer leadership. Such resistance has been evidenced as a potential barrier to peer leadership initiatives (Hart, 1990; Smylie & Denny, 1990). In support of those findings, teacher leaders from this study reported experiencing both subtle avoidance and outright resistance, which limited their ability to support teachers in the process of instructional change. This resistance to instructional support occurred even in the face of district mandates requiring the implementation of new constructivist math programs, which would typically be an impetus for teachers to utilize instructional

resources.

Despite norms of teacher autonomy, which continue to impact teacher leaders' efforts at instructional improvement, the teacher leaders involved in this study indicated that strategies such as relationship building, nonthreatening leadership, and targeting subsets of teachers are ways that the teacher leader can increase his or her access to resistant teachers. Although these approaches appear promising, there are also cautionary lessons to be learned from teacher leaders' descriptions of their enactment of these strategies. In some instances, the strategies may have had the unintended consequence of limiting the teacher leader's attention to instructional matters as a consequence of spending time on relationships, trying to appear nonthreatening, and focusing on only a portion of teachers. Thus understood, access strategies may constitute a compromise in the instructional improvement goals of teacher leadership initiatives.

In light of these potential compromises, it is especially useful to learn that teacher leaders perceived another resource that could promote classroom access without decreasing their attention to instructional improvement: greater administrative support. Teacher leaders reported that teacher access could be facilitated by the active involvement of a supportive principal or supervisor who offers guidance to the teacher leader and who sets expectations for faculty regarding instructional improvement and interaction with the teacher leader. These findings suggest that support from school- and district-level administrators may be a vital factor in teacher leaders' ability to serve as an influential source for leadership and resource for teachers' instructional improvement.

Access Strategies: Cautionary Lessons

Teacher leaders employed access strategies as a means of gaining access to resistant teachers. Clearly, without opportunities to interact with teachers, teacher leaders are unlikely to facilitate instructional improvements. Therefore, access to classrooms was described as an important challenge for teacher leaders to overcome. The teacher leaders also indicated that using these strategies enabled them to gain greater access to teachers. Although the strategies proved

useful for gaining classroom access, they also presented challenges to the enactment of teacher leadership roles, suggesting that the access strategies reported here also have limitations.

One limitation is the amount of time it takes to build trusting relationships. Teacher leaders in this study acknowledged spending a great deal of time, sometimes as much as half their day, building relationships with faculty members. This process of engendering trust was considered an important precursor to offering suggestions about a teacher's instruction. One challenge to building relationships may be a lack of time, especially when teacher leaders are under pressure to facilitate instructional change or when they are spread across a number of schools. Moreover, school districts may question the efficiency of teacher leadership roles if teacher leaders must spend a significant amount of their time building relationships instead of directly influencing instruction.

A second limitation stems from teacher leaders' efforts to appear nonthreatening, which may cause teachers to view teacher leadership positions as unnecessary or to believe that teacher leaders lack sufficient expertise. For example, if teacher leaders make an effort to minimize their status as experts, it may have the unintended affect of dissuading teachers from seeking their advice or assistance. Similarly, if teacher leaders spend their time doing tasks teachers could easily do themselves, such as photocopying, teachers may reject the notion that they are leaders and a potential source of instructional information. Most importantly, if the relationship between the teacher and teacher leader is predicated on nonthreatening leadership, it may be difficult for the teacher leader to encourage instructional change.

A third limitation arises when teacher leaders focus on more receptive subsets of teachers since these groups may not include all teachers in need of assistance. In some cases, new teachers may be familiar with a particular instructional approach, whereas veteran teachers may require assistance. Furthermore, working with a limited subset of the faculty may create a stigma associated with the work of the teacher leader, inhibiting the teachers' requesting assistance for fear of being labeled deficient.

The teacher leaders participating in this study reported that the use of access strategies enabled them to interact with teachers, a precondition for instructional improvement. Yet, the use of these strategies may decrease the likelihood that interaction will promote broad-based instructional improvement. A diminished instructional focus does not preclude the possibility that future interactions could evolve to include increased attention to instruction. Certainly, an argument could be made that noninstructional interaction serves as a stepping stone to instructionally focused interaction. While such a conclusion cannot be determined from the data presented here, this study offers valuable information for understanding how relationships between teacher leaders and teachers are established, laying the groundwork for future research on instructional outcomes of teacher leadership.

Administrators Promoting Instructional Improvement

While recognizing the possible limitations linked to teacher leaders' strategies for gaining access to resistant teachers, there is also evidence that the involvement of principals and district-level supervisors may promote teacher leaders' opportunities to improve instruction. When administrators articulate clear expectations for faculty regarding instructional change and then follow-up with monitoring and evaluations, teachers may be more likely to view teacher leaders as a resource. Conversely, a lack of administrator involvement may limit the instructional impact intended with the creation of teacher leadership positions.

A strong supervisory approach was a key component of instructional reform in District A where all teachers were held accountable for changing their instruction to align with the district's new constructivist math program. Supervisors made frequent visits to classrooms to ensure that teachers were improving their instruction and that the math teacher leaders were being used as a resource. Under these circumstances, relationships developed quickly, since weekly grade-level meetings with the teacher leader were mandated by the administration and teachers were under pressure to improve their practice. At the same time, teacher leaders retained their status as experts because there was no need to appear nonthreatening. Moreover, because the entire faculty

worked with the teacher leader, any stigma associated with asking for help was greatly reduced. Thus, in District A, the administration's willingness to pressure teachers, combined with an organizational design that promoted interaction, contributed to the success of the teacher leaders.

As demonstrated in this example, active involvement and support from principals and district-level supervisors could potentially lead to three positive outcomes. First, administrator involvement may reduce teacher leaders' reliance on access strategies as a means for interacting with teachers. Second, teachers may come to view teacher leaders as a valuable resource intended to support instructional improvement. Third, districts may see teacher leadership as an effective means of providing high-quality professional development as well as an efficient use of financial and human resources. Provided that administrators offer the support necessary to facilitate these potential benefits, teacher leadership initiatives appear to offer real possibilities for instructional improvement. These findings may be especially important for districts struggling to overcome the educational disadvantages of low socioeconomic status.

At the same time, this depiction of successful teacher leadership—supported by school administrators—does little to relieve principals of their exhaustive work responsibilities. If anything, teacher leadership could be perceived as increasing principals' workload. While these findings may appear to contradict a purported benefit of teacher leadership, in fact, they align closely with distributed leadership theory. Leadership, as understood by distributed leadership theorists, is made up of leadership functions which are stretched across leaders, leading to multiplicative benefits (Spillane et al., 2001) and not just the additive benefit of having more people to do the same job. Thus envisioned, teacher leadership initiatives should not be designed to transfer leadership functions from one formal role to another. Rather, teacher leadership should be premised on the notion that multiple leaders—teachers, principals, district-level supervisors, and formal teacher leaders—need to combine their efforts in order to reap the potential benefits: instructional improvement.

Conclusion

Findings from this study indicate that, in the face of teacher resistance, teacher leaders devise strategies that enable them to gain greater access to classrooms. These strategies may involve making concessions that can ultimately limit the impact that teacher leadership positions have on instructional improvement. Further evidence from this study suggests that, for formal teacher leadership positions to contribute to instructional change, teacher leaders must receive support from administrators who provide guidance and set expectations for teachers regarding teacher leaders' roles.

To maximize teacher leaders as an instructional resource, more information is needed about the enactment of teacher leadership roles. At present, the kind of impact that teacher leaders can have on instruction remains unclear. The findings presented here point to the need for research that examines how teacher leaders' relationships with teachers evolve over time, how they are affected by the access strategies that teacher leaders use, and, most importantly, the subsequent impact of teacher leadership on instructional improvement. Additionally, research on the contextual factors affecting teacher leadership—such as the design of the position, past leadership and instructional experience, and types of curriculum being implemented—can increase our understanding of how teacher leadership roles get implemented.

As a component of school reform, teacher leaders are often viewed as a means of directly improving the quality of instruction and, consequently, increasing student achievement. Their roles require a significant financial investment as well as the allocation of valuable human resources. Optimizing the value of such an investment is an important part of making distributed leadership roles a viable component of school reform.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participating Districts, 2001–02

	District A	District B	District C	District D	District E
District Factor Group	A/B	C/D	A/B	G/H	A/B
Total Enrollment	7,526	2,202	5,898	6,052	3,332
% White	1	41	37	31	85
% Black	71	45	37	44	6
% Hispanic	28	10	22	11	7
% passing rate on High-School Proficiency Test	29.4	42	47.4	59	63.9**
% of Students on Free or Reduced Lunch	64	50	45	27	35
Ratio of 9th- to 12th-Grade Enrollment	1.79:1	*	1.33:1	1.64:1	1.40:1
% High School Attendance	90.5	90.4	92.8	87.2	93.2

*No 12th grade class

** The high school, unlike the elementary schools, enrolled students from surrounding townships that were better off socio-economically. This difference is reflected in the higher graduation rates.

Table 2

Characteristics of Teacher Leadership by District, 2002–03

Districts	District A	District B	District C	District D	District E
Number of Math Coordinators	11	2	2	2**	3
Number of Elementary Schools	10	2	8	4	4
Number of Schools per Math Coordinator	1*	1	8	2	1***
Subjects Covered	Math	Math	Math Soc Studies Lang. Arts	Math	Math
Year position created	Fall 2001	Fall 2002	Fall 2000; Redesigned Fall 2002	Fall 2000: Fall 2002****	Fall 2002

*One large school has two math coordinators.

**Third position added March 2003; not included in study.

***Two smallest K–2 schools shared by one math coordinator.

****Second position added in 2002.

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