

Preparing Teacher Leaders

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2021

Abstract

The aim of this study was to identify the knowledge and skills that first-year teachers need as they enter a teacher leadership system. A state-wide survey, as well as observations and interviews in three dissimilar school districts, were used to gather data to determine what skills and knowledge preservice teachers need. Methodological triangulation of the data indicates a clear path to teacher leadership preparation. Candidates must examine leadership, teacher leadership systems, and the roles of teacher leaders. They must also use communication skills to participate in genuine collaboration. Candidates also need to be prepared to be enlightened teachers.

Teacher leadership systems are spreading across the United States in an effort to improve teaching and learning. States, such as Iowa, Massachusetts, Tennessee, Kentucky, Minnesota, and Arizona, and districts such as Baltimore, Maryland and Denver, Colorado have already developed teacher leadership systems. Some systems are created through district initiatives and others through legislation. In Iowa, House File 215 established the Teacher Leadership and Compensation System in 2013. This bill provided funding for school districts to create teacher leadership programs that allow classroom teachers to take leadership roles as instructional coaches, model teachers, and curriculum and professional development leaders, with many still teaching in the classroom. The goals of this new structure for K-12 education were to attract and retain effective teachers, promote collaboration, reward professional growth and effective teaching, and to improve student achievement by strengthening instruction. By the fall of 2016, every school district in the state of Iowa had been approved for funding and implementation of this system. Whether initiated by state or district school improvement efforts, or by state law, teacher leadership systems are designed to improve teaching and to raise student achievement by distributing leadership more broadly (Bierly, Doyle, & Smith, 2016).

Although teacher leadership has been gaining favor over the past twenty years, and teacher leadership systems are being developed, teacher leadership is not well-defined (York-Barr & Duke, 2004) and many models exist. Some models include leading from the classroom and focus on building the capacities of the students and teachers (Kentucky, 2015), and are not defined by positional leadership (Danielson, 2006). Other models focus on roles and positions, with some including traditional administrative leadership. Some definitions state that teacher leaders are in the classroom part or full time (Leading Educators, n.d.), while others

acknowledge teacher leadership positions outside the classroom. Transforming, and advocating for, the profession is included in some definitions (Kentucky, 2015).

As states and districts develop these wide-ranging teacher leadership systems, teacher education programs are most often overlooked. Alignment to teacher preparation is mentioned in only one teacher leadership system plan (Leading Educators, n.d.), but without details of implementation. Teacher preparation programs are preparing pre-service teachers to enter a new educational system that teacher education faculty and teacher education candidates have never experienced. Teacher education programs must determine how to prepare first-year teachers who are ready to participate with, and then become, teacher leaders. The aim of this study was to identify the knowledge and skills that first-year teachers need to be prepared to enter a teacher leadership system.

This distributed leadership may impact teaching and learning in a variety of ways. Instead of a single principal attempting to improve teaching, developing a cadre of teacher leaders may have more impact in less time (Bierly, Doyle, & Smith, 2016). It is asserted that multiple leaders accomplishing a task may amount to more than the sum of those leaders' practices (Spillane, Halvorson, & Diamond, 2004). Teacher leadership systems also create career pathways for highly effective teachers, and attract and retain effective teachers (Iowa Department of Education, 2015). The National Education Association (2011) proclaimed that to retain Gen "Y" teachers in the profession, they need to participate in decision-making, collaborate with others, receive in-depth feedback and support, and have the opportunity to take on new roles and responsibilities. The ultimate goal of these innovative programs is to increase student achievement by creating systems that distribute leadership which then improve teaching and learning; however, these systems vary greatly.

Method

Survey

A survey, created in SurveyMonkey, was distributed state-wide to superintendents and building principals, who were asked to respond and then forward the survey to teachers. This was necessary as no state-wide teacher email database existed. Respondents were asked to rank order skills for teachers working within the teacher leadership system from most to least important. They were then asked to rank order the skills for first-year teachers to learn in their college teacher education programs prior to entering the teacher leadership system from most important to least important. SurveyMonkey was used to calculate weighted average rankings. Weights were applied in reverse order with most preferred response having the largest weight and the least preferred response having a weight of one. This orders the choices from most preferred overall to least preferred overall. Open-ended survey questions were examined using the text analysis feature within SurveyMonkey. Answers, or portion of answers, were tagged and then categorized which then led to additional insight into the responses.

Observations

Over the course of six weeks, teacher leadership activities were observed in three districts. The districts included a small, rural district with declining enrollment, a moderate-sized suburban district with steady enrollment, and a large suburban district with growing enrollment. Each district differed in their years of experience with the teacher leadership system with one, two, or three years of implementation. Observations included professional development created by teacher leaders, model teaching, instructional coaching, district teacher leadership team meetings, mentoring/induction meetings for first and second year teachers, professional learning

community meetings, grade-level and subject area meetings, instructional planning meetings, building leadership team meetings, and data analysis meetings. While tasks were observed, more importantly, the skills necessary to successfully participate in these tasks were noted.

Interviews

While in the schools, interviews were conducted with superintendents, principals, district teacher leadership coordinators, model teachers, instructional coaches, mentoring/induction leaders, and classroom teachers. Those interviewed were asked what skills first-year teachers needed to fully participate with teacher leaders, and how these skills might be developed. Participants were also asked to share any additional thoughts related to the teacher leadership system.

Methodological Triangulation

The data, which was gathered using three different methods (observation, surveys, and interviews) and included qualitative and quantitative data collection, was triangulated to identify the knowledge and skills needed for first-year teachers to seamlessly enter the teacher leadership system. Methodological triangulation utilizes more than one research method in the study of a single phenomenon (Risjord et al, 2001; Casey & Murphey, 2009). In particular, across-methods methodological triangulation combines quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques (Boyd, 2001; Casey & Murphy, 2009). This method has been found to be beneficial in confirming findings, increasing validity, and enhancing understanding of the phenomenon (Redfern & Norman, 1994; Risjord et al, 2001; Foss & Ellefsen, 2002; Casey & Murphy, 2009). The triangulation of data gathered for this study led to clear findings.

Findings

Collaboration

An African proverb says that if you want to go fast, go alone; but if you want to go far, go together (Futernick, 2016). The days of teachers closing their doors and teaching in isolation are long gone. Teachers were observed working in teams to plan professional development including creating i-Movies to inspire teachers and crafting personalized professional development plans. Grade level teams planned lessons jointly, including a secondary team creating an interdisciplinary unit based on the play that would be performed by the drama department the following semester. One very successful elementary team used the expertise and passions of team members to assign the leader for jointly planning each content area. Professional learning communities selected common artifacts for assessment, developed consistency in evaluating assessments, and analyzed data. Grade level teams wrote shared annual goals, while building leadership teams provided feedback to administrators. A secondary math department collaborated to restructure an Algebra I course and a secondary grade level team determined the most effective way to match students and teachers during Intervention Time. In one middle school, QR codes, a type of matrix barcode, posted outside classrooms served as an invitation to visit and provide feedback. Colleagues click on the QR code as they enter the room. This links the observer to information about the lesson and a Google Form to enter feedback. The focus on collaboration was even noted in the physical building space with one school having a Faculty Collaboration Room. The least successful team observed lacked a shared purpose and/or a level of trust that allowed for open and honest communication to facilitate collaboration. Team members directly asked why they were meeting and held side conversations about their concerns while never sharing with the team leader.

Survey respondents also recognized the importance of collaboration within teacher leadership systems. Collaboration was identified as the most important skill for teachers working within teacher leadership systems with the highest weighted average ranking with a score of 7.0. It was also identified as the third most important skill to be taught in teacher education programs with a weighted average ranking of 6.06, closely following pedagogy at 6.25 and communication skills at 6.20.

Interviews also indicated a need to collaborate. One first-year teacher stated that during college she had always written lesson plans by herself. After being a practicing teacher for three months, she had never written a lesson plan alone and always planned jointly with her grade level team. During interviews, all three school districts found that providing collaboration opportunities for “singletons” to be a challenge. For example, a small school district or building may have only one counselor, or one band director, or one special education teacher. While some have integrated “singletons” into other groups, this has not been effective. In some districts a “singleton” may be only a short drive from another teacher in their position so that they may collaborate. However, in rural districts, the challenge is even greater. The use of technology for virtual meetings is being explored in these cases.

Communication

Communication is seen as the foundation of collaboration. When communication is open and honest within a trusting environment teams thrive. An elementary grade level professional learning community demonstrated this during joint planning time. Each member of the team spoke for similar amounts of time and each group member freely shared their ideas, and even disagreed and challenged one another as decisions were made. A secondary grade level team freely shared their frustrations about incomplete homework and then quickly moved to sharing

solutions to the problem. Again, each team member spoke freely, even when they were not in agreement. A building leadership team was very open about sharing their concerns with administrators. The administrators listened carefully and asked clarifying questions before proposing potential solutions for the team to consider. During an instructional coaching cycle, the instructional coach shared feedback with a teacher whose lesson did not go as planned. The instructional coach asked guiding questions and used shared reflection to prompt changes for future instruction.

In other cases, poor communication was observed that led to dysfunction. In one case a team was unclear as to the purpose of their team and the purpose of the meeting, which led to side conversations and visible frustration. Although subsets of the team shared their disagreement with those seated next to them, the disagreement was not shared with the entire team or its leader. The team had difficulty making decisions when they did not have a significant level of trust to communicate openly and honestly. One elementary grade level team consisted of three teachers, two first-year teachers and a veteran teacher. The differing levels of experience and willingness to embrace change also negatively impacted the ability to make decisions.

In some cases, overt measures were taken to increase the level of trust and open communications. One district teacher leadership team watched a video clip of the Challenger explosion which identified a lack of trust and open communication as a reason that the mission continued which resulted in the explosion. The team then discussed their level of trust with one another and how open they were willing to be with the group. In other cases, social gatherings were planned to increase trust. Mentoring and Induction Program participants gathered after school for a social hour and appetizers at a local restaurant. At another school, the professional development planning team chose to incorporate time for archery between professional

development trainings. The purpose was to have fun and become better acquainted with colleagues which would build trust and open the lines of communication.

Surveys also pointed to communication as a key skill within teacher leadership systems. Respondents ranked communication as the second most important skill for working in the teacher leadership system. With an average weighted ranking of 6.82, only collaboration was ranked higher. Collaboration was also ranked as the second most important skill to learn in teacher education programs. With an average weighted ranking of 6.20, only pedagogy was ranked higher. Written responses included trust, listening to opposing views, a willingness to have difficult conversations, receiving feedback, conflict resolution, thoughtfully considering what others are saying, face-to-face conversations, and confidentiality as essential skills related to communication.

During an interview, one district teacher leadership director said “words are important.” Even the titles of positions were carefully selected to give meaning and context to the position. The title Collaboration and Innovation Teacher carries a different connotation than Model Teacher. He said it doesn’t “carry the baggage” associated with Model Teacher. Several educators mentioned that acronyms often make communication difficult. All parties must be familiar with every acronym used. Some schools provide online “acronym dictionaries” for new employees. A secondary teacher said that “a teacher’s knowledge is more powerful than a test score” and that teachers must have the ability to communicate what they know about a student. Communicating to administrators, colleagues, and students what is known beyond a test score is essential to planning teaching and learning for student success.

Leadership Skills

Teacher leadership is not only positional leadership. In one elementary school, the PLC leader rotates every month. A first-year teacher was observed leading a meeting of veteran teachers during data analysis. The first-year teacher did not hold a formal position of leadership within the teacher leadership system, but was leading none the less.

While leadership skills were not among the skills that survey respondents were asked to rank order, overall leadership skills were mentioned in written comments. One respondent wrote “Do what leaders do. Lead! Don’t wait for direction or expect to be told everything. Be a risk-taker and ask for forgiveness later.” It is clear that first year teachers are expected to enter their profession ready to lead and take risks.

During interviews, many respondents identified leadership as a key skill although it was rare to find educators who had intentional leadership training. Instructional coaches had training on being an instructional coach and mentor teachers had mentor teacher training. However, professional development related to leadership, organizational leadership, systems thinking, or change theory were not a part of their training. One instructional coach, who also holds an administrator’s license, said that the most useful professional development that she uses as an instructional coach happened during her graduate courses to become an administrator. She had coursework that had her examine her strengths and weaknesses as a leader and her preferred leadership style. Of the teacher leaders who were interviewed, none were teacher leaders in the hope of becoming an administrator. Only one teacher leader held an administrator’s license. For others, this type of professional development was missing. Teacher leaders also stated during interviews that college students need a basic understanding of teacher leadership systems and the roles within the systems. Teachers need to understand that an instructional coach is there “to

help, but not to fix or evaluate” teaching and learning. College students should also be introduced to the coaching cycle. One instructional coach said that preservice teachers should know that an instructional coach is their “thinking partner.”

Enlightened Teaching

During observation in schools, written comments on surveys, and in interviews a common set of words surfaced to describe a teacher who was ready to participate with teacher leaders. These words shared common ground but no single word expressed the totality of the list. This list includes growth mindset, reflective, coachable, willing to ask for help, flexible, open to new ideas/feedback/change, adaptability, willing to take risks, problem-solvers, continuous improvement, and grit. During an interview, one teacher summarized this by saying “new teachers need to know that everyone struggles and so focus on personal growth.”

“Enlightened” captures these ideas related to teaching. Enlightened means illuminated, well-informed, sophisticated, open-minded, broad-minded (progressive, unbiased), refined, and cultivated (improve, better, elevate). Enlightened teaching reflects the type of teacher who embraces teacher leadership.

Implications

Collaboration

To fully prepare teacher education candidates to enter teacher leadership systems, it is clear that they must be skilled collaborators. Candidates would benefit from practicing collaborative learning during their teacher education programs. However, placing students in groups does not necessarily equate to collaboration. Group work may lead to a “divide and conquer” mentality with “free-riders” and minimal interaction emphasizing the product without regard to the process (Scheuermann, 2018). Collaborative learning requires group effort with

each learner being held accountable as an emphasis is placed on both the process and the product (Sheuermann, 2018). Genuine collaboration may be practiced in many ways. Real data from area schools, with identifying information removed, could be analyzed by groups of candidates who then collaborate to write one lesson plan informed by the data. Candidates may assess real PK-12 artifacts, working toward inter-rater reliability. Secondary education candidates may write interdisciplinary units with partners from very divergent content areas. Group goals could be written, data collected, and progress toward the goal assessed.

Candidates that are preparing to teach in areas which may cause them to be a “singleton” should be prepared to reach out to “singletons” in other buildings and districts. Teachers could travel for face-to-face meetings or utilize technology for virtual meetings.

To maintain the focus on process as well as product, candidate teams may use forms to develop and assess the functionality of their team (Ferriter, Graham, & Wight, 2013; Curtis & City, 2009). This information can focus team improvement efforts. Parker Palmer (2004) suggests that circles of trust have clear limits, skilled leadership, open invitations, common ground, and graceful ambiance in the physical meeting space. Candidates may use these principles to build trust within their teams in education classrooms.

Candidates must also identify when their team becomes dysfunctional and how to make changes to become more functional. Peter Lencioni (2002) identifies five dysfunctions of a team, which include the absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, and avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results. As candidates collaborate they are likely to encounter a dysfunctional team. With an understanding of the dysfunction, the team can address the issue.

Communication

Written and oral communication skills are a focus of teacher education programs, whether through program standards or the college's general education requirements. However, the communication skills needed to excel within the teacher leadership system go well beyond written and oral communication skills. Teachers need to communicate clearly and honestly even in difficult situations. They also must be prepared to give and receive feedback. These skills need to be directly taught and practiced.

Jim Knight (2016) says that our schools are only as good as the conversations within them, and that better conversations improve collaboration. The lack of good conversations not only negatively impacts communication, but also compromises collaboration. Conversations are most difficult when there are opposing opinions, strong emotions, and/or high stakes (Patterson, 2012). Teacher education classrooms must be safe spaces to learn how to have these conversations and practice them with guidance from faculty. Genuine difficult conversations will arise from candidates' collaborative course work.

Giving and receiving feedback is a foundation of teacher leadership systems, but most find it equally difficult to give and receive feedback. Stone and Heen (2015) say that feedback is like a gift *and* a colonoscopy, humorously wondering if the learning is worth the pain. They identify three triggers that block feedback: truth, relationships, and identity. Once candidates are directly taught about these triggers, they can learn to appropriately give and receive feedback. This can be practiced as they give peer feedback, and receive feedback from peers, K-12 mentor teachers, and college supervisors and faculty.

Candidates must also become familiar with common educational acronyms. They should also be encouraged to ask for acronym dictionaries when placed in schools with unique acronyms.

Leadership Skills

Preservice teachers need to be introduced to teacher leadership systems and the leadership roles within the systems. Candidates can examine state leadership systems and compare and contrast them. The many definitions of teacher leadership can be dissected and candidates can create their own definitions. Preservice teachers can be introduced to instructional coaching during their practica and student teaching experiences. While instructional coaching is designed to be teacher initiated and supervision of practica and student teaching is required, essential elements of coaching can be mimicked. The Jim Knight (2007) model of instructional coaching would suggest asking student teachers to rate their lesson on a scale from 1-10. The supervisor then would ask what would need to change for the lesson to be rated higher. This serves as a goal. Jointly a plan is created to improve instruction and data is collected to determine whether a goal is met or not. Another way for candidates to experience the teacher leadership system is to interview teacher leaders during practica and/or student teaching. Although instructional coaches would like to complete a coaching cycle with student teachers, it is unlikely that time will allow this.

Preservice teachers also need to struggle with the general concepts of leadership before engaging in the complexities of teacher leadership. What is leadership? How do you conceptualize leadership? What is your philosophy and style of leadership? What strengths and weaknesses do you bring to leadership? Candidates would benefit from direct instruction in

theories of leadership and self-assessment of leadership. A tool such as Clifton Strengths may be useful.

Finally, candidates must practice leadership skills. This may happen while collaborating in teacher education classrooms or in college clubs and organizations. While they will face obstacles, Hess (2015) suggests that they become “cage-busting teachers” who overcome obstacles and solve problems so that they can focus on what matters most.

Enlightened Teaching

Preparing enlightened teachers involves a focus on continuous improvement, reflection, and our attitudes toward failure. Feedback to preservice teachers that includes options of met/not met or a numerical rating scale, may lead candidates to believe that they are “done” when they earn a “met” or the highest numerical score. Regardless of how well a teacher is teaching, improvement can always be made. Preservice teachers may be asked to read the mentor evaluation from their first practicum and set goals for growth which they share with their next practicum mentor teacher. Heggart (2015) suggests that modeling and formative feedback are ways to develop a growth mindset in teachers. Education faculty can model a growth mindset by sharing their own professional development, new learning, and course changes with candidates. Once they see that professors with extensive teaching experience are still learning, they will begin their journey of lifelong learning as well. Enlightened teaching focuses on “the hard stuff” in our teaching, and encourages us to try innovation with the understanding we may fail (Gil, 2016). This requires candidates to use formative feedback to determine what is hard. It also requires a safe place for preservice teachers to try innovation and have an understanding that all teachers fail from time to time. Sarah Brown Wessling, the 2010 National Teacher of the Year, shares one of her failures in *When a Lesson Goes Wrong* (teachingchannel.org, n.d.). She says

we don't have to hide our failures, but we do have to get better for tomorrow without blaming the students. When teacher education candidates hear their faculty or a National Teacher of the Year share their failures, they feel as if they have been given permission to fail in an effort to innovate and improve. In addition, candidates should wrestle with why teachers, as well as professional athletes and famous musicians, need a coach. A tweet from #ASCDL2L says "a coach pushes and prods to facilitate stretching and growth." This is certainly enlightened teaching. Education faculty must also focus on reflection which requires time and intention. Providing time for reflection in class, requiring reflection as a part of lesson planning, and joint reflection with field supervisors helps to develop reflective and enlightened practitioners.

Conclusions

Although this study focused on preparing teacher leaders within college and university teacher education programs, the skills identified could be developed in early service teachers. New teacher mentors, instructional coaches, professional development specialists, administrators and others who support early service teachers could develop programming to intentionally build the skills identified in this study. New teacher mentors could work with their mentees individually or in small groups to build the necessary skills. During coaching cycles, instructional coaches could help new teachers explore their proficiency at these skills, and then provide the resources and support for improvement. Administrators could, with intentionality, review these skills as a part of formal teacher evaluations. It is evident that there are many who can support new teachers as they develop their collaboration, communication and leadership skills while practicing enlightened teaching, until all teacher education programs implement intentional practices to prepare teacher leaders to enter teacher leadership systems.

As teacher leadership systems continue to be developed, teacher education programs, new teacher mentors, instructional coaches, professional development specialists, and administrators must prepare preservice teachers to become teacher leaders. Data from observations, surveys, and interviews have identified a clear path to teacher leadership preparation. Candidates must grapple with the idea of leadership and their own leadership skills. They need an introduction to teacher leadership systems. They must be able to participate in genuine collaboration, and must have the extraordinary communication skills to do so. They also need to be prepared to be enlightened teachers. “Within every school (and teacher education program candidate) there is a sleeping giant of teacher leadership, which can be a strong catalyst for making change” (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001, pg. 2) which will improve teaching and learning, and ultimately student achievement.

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