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Teacher Leaders Creating Cultures of School Renewal and Transformation

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Abstract

This paper reports on an ethnographic study of 25 teacher leaders in five schools within a large midwestern city school district. Data was collected through unstructured interviews and observations of teachers. Three central themes appeared repeatedly, and explain the presence of and support for teachers as leaders, including: (1) specific school structures and organizational patterns; (2) particular processes and identities; and (3) a deliberate use of outside resources with consistent, strong community relationships. Conclusions assert the possibility of teacher leadership as a model and theory of leadership for school renewal.

The demands on school leaders have increased dramatically in recent years. The pressure for accountability in student achievement has intensified as government scrutiny grows intense and ever-threatening. A dispiriting public opinion and an overall diminished confidence in the abilities of schools to succeed has surfaced even as expectations for schools are on the rise. Meanwhile, demographic shifts are altering student populations in ways that necessitate more responsive and innovative instruction, and escalating poverty among children in the United States is placing demands for new and more comprehensive school programs. Such troubling events have contributed to the creation of complex new school situations (Fullan and Hargreaves 1996; Short and Greer 1997; Lambert, Collay, Dietz, Kent, and Richert 1997). Schools must negotiate daily life amid these complications, giving rise to the need for cogent new theories and models of leadership.

School leaders function at the pinnacle of such renewal efforts. The knowledge and skills required of school leaders today seem infinite, and the need for judicious actions

has certainly deepened. Leaders must engage more effectively in wider interaction with larger groups of people, even as greater internal responsibilities and dilemmas continue to surface within schools. Moreover, it seems that as demands on school leaders multiply, school principals and other administrators have no one with whom to share their tremendous responsibilities (Fullan and Hargreaves 1996).

At the same time, teachers, for the most part, have been kept out of many important conversations on, and the significant work of, school restructuring and reform. They seldom have been encouraged to join forces with building and district administrators on reform efforts even when such changes impact the fundamental work of teaching and learning in schools (Sergiovanni and Starratt 1997).

School leaders today, however, can no longer afford to serve as sole decision makers and holders of power. Models and practices of leadership that facilitate the leadership capacities of others must be developed. School leaders have to build more collaborative and democratic arrangements with teachers and others to achieve the enormous ambitions of schooling and respond to students' diverse needs. This research indicates that theories and models of teacher leadership could significantly contribute to the renewal processes in today's schools.

Defining Teacher Leadership

Definitions of teacher leadership vary but hold in common an expanded notion of leadership beyond traditional classroom boundaries. Fullan and Hargreaves (1996, 13) stated that teacher leadership is the "capacity and commitment to contribute beyond one's classroom." Crowther and Olsen (1996, 32) captured a philosophical essence of teacher leadership in their definition:

An ethical stance that is based upon the views of a better world and the power of teaching to shape meaningful systems. It manifests itself in actions that involve the wider school community and leads to the creation of ideas that will enhance the quality of life of the community in the long term.

In models of teacher leadership, teachers take more responsibility for decision-making and activities outside of their classrooms (Blase and Blase 2000; Fullan and Hargreaves 1996). They assist in reforms that impact the organizational processes within schools (Evans 1996). Teacher leaders are those who are willing to work alongside building principals to envision a better future, foster hope and honesty, tackle obstacles and impediments, and build community while improving the educational climate (Cranston 2000).

Unfortunately, the knowledge base shows a dearth of research on teacher leadership. There are few studies that reflect how teachers engage with other leaders and how this impacts organizational culture (Smylie and Denny 1990). In addition, teacher leadership remains vaguely defined to scholars and practitioners (Sherrill 1999; Silva, Gimbert, and Nolan 2000). Crowther (1996, 305) asserted, "Teacher leadership remains conceptually underdeveloped."

Beachum and Dentith

This research study explored definitions of teacher leadership from the perspective of teachers who take leadership roles in their schools. In addition, the related practices and processes understood and taken up by teachers in these settings were examined. Finally, research findings were connected to current debates on leadership versus management, and the quest for new paradigms of educational leadership.

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Researching Teacher Leadership

Schools in and surrounding our city have taken on a number of reform initiatives to improve their organizations through the creation of shared responsibility within learning communities (Chubb and Moe 1990; DuFour and Eaker 1998). The urban school district in this study embraced many reform models and practices touted in the early 1990s that sought to establish au-

tonomous school management arrangements at the school building level, and diminish some of the bureaucratic control held by the central school district office. These initiatives supported the emergence of some forms of leadership among teachers. Leadership responsibilities among teachers in this district became significant to the success of these reform efforts much the same as others have suggested (Sergiovanni and Starratt 1998; Fullan 1994).

Several examples of teacher leadership surfaced through contact with teachers, preservice administrators, and school principals in our University's Educational Leadership Department and prompted our inquiry into this area. Stories of school reform projects initiated by teachers working collaboratively through ad hoc committees and school governance councils, along with new quasi-administrative positions created specifically to support better teaching and increased learning among students, came to our attention and fostered our own curiosities. Among the questions to which answers were sought were:

- How do teachers see their roles as teacher leaders?
- Could such arrangements successfully dismantle the traditional mind-set of school management and transform schools into learning communities?
- How is teacher leadership reshaping the nature of teachers' work?
- What does teacher leadership look like?
- Can such practices bring more participatory democratic practices to schools?

Research was conducted in five schools within one school district. Schools were chosen that were reputed to recognize the value of *teachers as leaders* in the decision-making processes and overall organization of the school. Each school harbored aspects of site-based management at the school building level. A total of 25 teachers participated in the study.

Methods

The methodology used in this qualitative study evolved from an ethnographic approach as derived from various work within the fields of sociology in education (Hammersely and Atkinson 1995) and educational anthropology (Wolcott 1994). Initially, each school was contacted to set up times to meet with teachers in unstructured group interviews (Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte 1999). Each school was sent a brief description of the study and its intent, including a desire to speak with teachers about their work as *teacher leaders* in their school. The goal was to capture how teachers took on leadership roles in their schools and the ways school administrations were organized to foster new structures of leadership.

Interviews with teachers ranged in length from 30 minutes to two hours. At times, administrators or substitutes covered classes so teachers could spend time talking with us. Each school was visited at least three times for these discussions. Some schools indicated a more sustained interest in the research, and more visits were added as a result. A list of questions served as the guide for these meetings. Interviews included encounters with individual teachers as well as small group meetings with as many as five teachers. The interviews were recreated from notes that were taken. The written transcripts, about 20 in all, were distributed to all participants during subsequent visits for the purpose of correction and clarification. All corrections and revised comments from teachers were incorporated. The final versions served as data for analysis.

The transcripts led to the identification of the themes described below. Teacher interviews were followed by observations of teachers in committee work, team meetings, and large faculty meetings. Research field notes were taken at these sites, which led to a clearer understanding of the organization and effects of school teaming, committee work, and other related collaborative work.

Data was collected during eight months of continuous fieldwork in five schools. Two elementary schools (pre-k through grade 5), one middle school (grades 5–8), one K–8 school (pre-k through Grade 8), and one high school were included in the study. The findings from the first research phase were used in forming a second research study that is now in progress. The second part of the study focuses on the day-to-day work of building principals who foster teacher leadership.

Findings

- Three central themes explained the presence of and support of teachers as leaders:
1. Specific types of school structures and organizational patterns.
 2. Particular processes and identities practiced and shared among the teachers interviewed.
 3. A certain and deliberate use of outside resources along with consistent, strong community relationships.

School Structure and Organization

Particular school structures and organizational patterns were present in all five schools. Strong teacher teaming according to grade levels or subject, matter and consis-

Beachum and Dentith

tent teacher committee work on issues and events relevant to everyday teaching and learning were present. Teachers spent time in an organized and sustained fashion to plan curriculum together, talk generally about their teaching, relate student successes, and work on problems or new initiatives in the school. Teachers who held positions as quasi-administrators also were prevalent at these schools. These individuals taught part of the day but also performed many administrative duties related to curriculum planning, instructional supervision, new faculty acquisition, large field trips, discipline and referral, special program implementation, grant writing, and management of grant funding. All of these positions were filled by experienced teachers or less experienced teachers with specific expertise.

Practices and Identities

Particular processes that existed among teachers and administrators were also strongly evident in each school. For example, teachers initiated many changes at a variety of levels and felt encouraged and supported to do so. They believed that the administration heard and respected their opinions. They did not feel that their ideas for new initiatives had to be preapproved by the administration, nor did they feel pressure to be successful in all their endeavors. This phenomenon reached across all faculty positions, with teaching assistants and other support personnel reporting strong positive perceptions of their contributions to school life and comfort in initiating new ideas.

Likewise, administrators were perceived as open to ideas of change and seemed to readily embrace innovation. In one K–8 school, groups of teachers and teacher assistants met several times during the summer to discuss new initiatives for the upcoming school year and to coordinate their curriculums across disciplines and grade levels. These were not organized or prompted by the administration, but rather came out of the teachers' desires to support new practices that would strengthen the school's academic goals.

Teachers in the K–8 school described their sense of autonomy in initiating changes and new programs in their school. This school of predominately African-American students was identified as a school "in need of improvement" by the larger district. A group of seven teachers described several new initiatives they had made in the past two years. These initiatives, all teacher-inspired, included:

- a large inclusive school pilot that eliminated self-contained and/or related resource programs for all students in the upper grades;
 - an innovative arts project that partnered students with community entities on a regular basis;
 - monthly themed events for parents, children, and teachers; and
 - a program of new school electives that included curriculums on Caribbean drumming, race relations and the achievement gap, popular culture, and hip hop.
- Several teachers in this school also organized a Saturday morning youth basketball program for boys in grades 6–8.

Teachers felt that their ideas were heard and respected. Moreover, they believed they were expected to take on leadership roles in their school and to be highly involved in all aspects of school life. Being a leader, they indicated, is integral to their work as

teachers. Additionally, they believed that principals sought out their opinions on most important school matters. Teachers were involved in nearly every aspect of the school's governance. Teachers formed committees that initiated and completed work that previously was done solely by the principal. For example, in four of the five schools, teaching faculty interviewed teacher candidates on a regular basis and made hiring recommendations to the principal.

Finally, teachers described the risk-taking they engage in—a practice that is encouraged, fostered, and modeled by the principal. They perceived their principals as people who want to showcase the talents of the faculty and support staff, and who are willing to share the school's successes with them. This philosophy seemed to declare that what is best for students is seldom, if ever, challenged. This sentiment was shared by a number of faculty members in a variety of ways at each school setting.

Emergent theories of leadership urge school administrators to abandon ideologies and practices of linear management and control, and instead adopt broader and more encompassing notions of leadership.

Teachers believed that there are many opportunities at their schools for individuals “to step up to the plate and make contributions.” Several teachers described the social and professional interactions of their schools as multilayered with many factions that seem to operate simultaneously but in concert with others. Teachers, administrators, and support persons shared ideas, concerns, and perceptions with one another consistently and faithfully. Ideas were generated continually, and these schools strived to respect those who agreed or disagreed in the discourse and evolution of ideas and change.

Trust and caring for others, along with a strong sense of self-efficacy and high regard for the mission of the school, surfaced repeatedly among those interviewed. Trust was described as reciprocal.

Teachers also revealed ways that their work shaped their identities. Some teachers described themselves as self-starters who work a little too hard at times, or consummate professionals who go above and beyond their job descriptions. They described their work as intense with a strong sense of their own capabilities as leaders and teachers. All teachers articulated a love for teaching and a clear sense of their own personal and professional purposes. They regarded their work as teachers as valuable and central to their life purpose. Many viewed themselves as good learners as well as good leaders.

Some expressed aspects of their own spirituality and connected these sensibilities with their teaching work. They shared varied and strong religious faiths as evidence of their commitment to teaching and serving children. These individuals shared common

Beachum and Dentith

values of community making, justice, and service toward one another. They felt compelled to change the world for the better and to create bridges among themselves and the children in their care. They shared a sense of community with others who strive to make schools better places for children. Some teachers were community activists with long histories of working in the community and alongside others for social change.

Most teachers exuded a strong sense of justice and concern for the well-being of children, particularly children in urban environments. They exhibited distinct feelings of pride in their schools, their work, and the children they serve. These traits also were observed in their classroom lessons and in the work they pursued in faculty meetings, committee work, and other event planning.

Teacher leadership surfaces as a way for teachers and administrators to be renewed and to transform their practices in this all too prescribed era of accountability.

Community Involvement

The third theme showed that teachers placed a strong emphasis on engaging with a larger community beyond the school. All used—or attempted to procure—grant monies and foundation support to promote their work and what they hoped to accomplish in their schools. Each school actively sought grant monies and other forms of community support, and funded innovative programs as a result of grant activity. A large percentage of the quasi-administrative positions described earlier were

entirely funded by grants. These teachers seemed to know how to obtain and maintain support from several community entities simultaneously. They saw themselves as strong community players, with a responsibility for making consistent contributions to the lives of others, both in and out of school. For example, one of the quasi-administrators articulated his school's goals relative to community involvement. In an informal presentation to area school administrators, he explained that his school maintains and strives to encompass three perspectives:

1. A strong connection to the university (for consulting resources and research support).
2. A strong connection to the community and the urban environment.
3. A strong connection to the world via the Internet as a means of helping kids and others see the big picture.

One K–5 teacher indicated that teacher leaders are those who focus on organizing and advocating for teachers. Teacher leaders were the “challengers to impositions” handed down to them. He cited the work of local teacher unions who opposed the imposition of more than 500 standards from the state's department of public instruction.

This teacher felt that unions are a form of teacher leadership that is seldom recognized or focused upon. Though he was the only person to name teacher unions as an outlet for teacher leadership, most teachers were active union members who regarded union work as integral to their feelings of pride in being teachers and a mechanism for affecting change in their urban district.

Most teachers also relayed the importance of establishing and maintaining strong relationships with parents. They met with parents frequently, held events that were collaboratively organized with parents, and included parents in their committee work and in the overall school governance work. In fact, four teacher leaders started their teaching careers as parents who became instructional aides in the school and, eventually, earned their teaching certification. Three were support teachers—parents who worked in the school but were not licensed teachers.

Discussion and Implications

This research pointed out several implications for educational administrators regarding teacher leadership. First, research into teacher leadership contributes to the practical knowledge of work on new theories of leadership in education. Emergent theories of leadership urge school administrators to abandon ideologies and practices of linear management and control, and instead adopt broader and more encompassing notions of leadership. Many contemporary theorists advocate moving away from administrative leadership that is based on the individual traits of leaders or arranged in hierarchical fashion to leadership that includes some of the following ideas:

- leadership that inspires others in the creation of teaching and learning communities (DuFour and Eaker 1998; Palmer 1998);
- leaders as facilitators of democratic communities (Glickman 1998);
- leaders as organizers of mutually agreed upon goals from formal and informal positions of authority (Kellerman 1999);
- leaders who can embody the vision, values, and beliefs by all members of an organization (Wheatley 1999); and
- leaders as guides in the development of sense making, inquiry, participation, and reflection among people (Lambert 2002).

Teacher leadership also may help dissolve the dichotomous debate that has placed management and leadership in opposition to one another (Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson 1996). A combination of the best of both perspectives is needed and exhibited among a wider group of participants. Teachers and school administrators lead and manage diverse aspects of the school. Leadership and management are both needed, since leadership provides the vision and sets the course of the organization, while management of day-to-day practices and maintenance of the organization drives its goals. Schools that promote teacher leadership do not segregate leadership and management. Both functions are performed by all and delineated in a way that promotes shared responsibility and action.

It appears that teachers who take leadership roles in their schools are successful agents and conduits in promoting cultural change. Their work as leaders—in and out of

Beachum and Dentith

their classrooms—seems to push the school culture toward a more inclusive and collaborative one. When the work of teachers is held in the highest regard and is made visible throughout the school, the culture of the school shifts from authoritative, linear, and mechanical to open, responsive, and thoughtful. For some time, scholars and others have pushed the educational pendulum toward more collaborative and inclusive models (Owens 2000). Reform efforts that hope to find pragmatic ways to influence school cultures toward more collaborative environments most likely will find resonance in the teacher-leadership effort.

Finally, a related but more specific finding is that educators in these schools take on important new roles. Their work helps break down some barriers that rigidly lock people into specific roles. Teacher leaders are viewed as being capable, and are endowed with opportunities and authority for their unique insights. Traditionally, teachers were viewed as classroom experts that had limited contact and influence in the school organization. School principals were thought of as building managers and bureaucrats who had little engagement with the classroom/curriculum (Alston 2002). Our observations in these schools indicated a sense of trust and collegiality that has transformed traditional notions of school roles. Teacher leaders were encouraged to be assertive, take risks, assume greater organizational responsibility, and discover new purpose. Conversely, administrators seemed to be more collaborative and nurturing while assuming the roles of facilitators and community builders as they worked to create cultures of caring in their schools. Moreover, we suspect, but cannot claim here, that these restructured roles also might positively affect student perceptions and performance.

Recommendations

This research on teacher leadership suggests that the social and moral identities and related actions of teachers and school administrators as observed in these school sites can create dramatic changes in the culture of schools. When teachers and administrators take on new roles, emergent theories of leadership can be explored and new school structures can be envisioned. Teacher leadership surfaces as a way for teachers and administrators to be renewed and to transform their practices in this all too prescribed era of accountability. It can guide innovation and ingenuity, create novel ways to navigate the multiple roles and tasks of adults in schools, and pose fundamental questions related to beliefs and values of schooling. Teacher leadership, it seems, is a judicious, as well as timely, endeavor.

In closing, several speculative recommendations for educators in schools who desire to build communities of teacher leaders are offered. Administrators might strive to see better the contributions and values of teachers and other adults in the daily operation of schools. They might learn various means to recognize and elevate the skills and abilities of good teachers in assuming more responsibilities. They also could, with some deliberation, begin to involve teachers in their decision-making, hand over some tasks to teachers, and ensure that they are given adequate time and resources to be successful in these endeavors. In talking with teachers, administrators could begin to listen more intently, ask questions, and work to have meaningful conversations with them. Most importantly, this research indicates that school ad-

ministrators must learn to trust and regard teachers as their peers even as they nurture their potential to contribute outside of their classrooms.

Teachers, on the other hand, might assert themselves more frequently and positively to take a more active role in the daily work of schools. They must be willing to take risks, make assertions, and more soundly value their intuitive notions about teaching and children to impact a wider arena in schools.

Finally, leaders of educational-administration programs at universities are encouraged to join their colleagues in teacher education to develop graduate programs. This research supports the notion that educational administration and curriculum and instruction should focus on facilitating teacher leadership in collaborative and reflexive ways. Teacher leadership uses the expertise and experience of classroom teachers (curriculum and instruction) and blends it with knowledge of school organization and change (educational administration). Combining the best of both can ease increasing educational demands, reconfigure hierarchical power structures, and unite teachers and administrators in the interest of genuine renewal and true transformation.

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Beachum and Dentith



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