Superintendents' Perceptions of Teacher Leadership in Selected Districts[*]

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Abstract

This paper documents the results of a mixed method study of superintendents who participated in a survey while attending an annual meeting in 2009. The superintendents (N= 25) were from a variety of states, and they were educational leaders in rural, suburban and urban school districts. While small in number, the results of this study reflect the information that is known about teacher leadership, namely, that teachers are primarily performing traditional roles that include various leadership assignments such as school, department or grade level positions. While noting the benefits of teacher leadership, superintendents reported concerns for teacher unions and school culture as the primary challenges to the implementation of teacher leadership.

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Sumario en español
Este papel documenta los resultados de un estudio mezclado del método de supervisores que tomaron parte
en una inspección al asistir una reunión anual en 2009. Los supervisores (N = 25) fueron de una variedad
de estados, y ellos fueron líderes educativos en distritos rurales, suburbanos y urbanos de escuela. Mientras
pequeño en el número, los resultados de este estudio reflejan la información que es sabida de liderazgo de
maestro, a saber, que maestros realizan principalmente papeles tradicionales que incluyen varias tareas de
liderazgo como la escuela, el departamento o posiciones de nivel de grado. Al notar los beneficios de liderazgo
de maestro, los supervisores informaron preocupaciones para uniones de maestro y cultura de escuela como
los desafíos primarios a la implementación de liderazgo de maestro.

> NOTE: Esta es una traducción por computadora de la página web original. Se suministra como
> información general y no debe considerarse completa ni exacta.

1 Introduction

As educational leaders work to respond to reform efforts, the role of teachers comes into sharp focus. A
central question emerges as to the extent of leadership that teachers will perform as superintendents respond
to the calls for improved achievement of every student. Will the teachers play a pivotal role in the response
to these challenges? Will their traditional roles of teaching be transformed, new positions created, informal
and formal leadership roles such as department or grade level chair be expanded? While the questions about
expanded roles for teacher leaders are yet to be resolved, the debate continues to gain momentum in our
nation relative to the need to have a quality teacher in front of every student. Teacher leadership offers
opportunities for change in both formal and informal teaching roles, with teachers taking more responsibility
to respond to new legislative mandates for school reform.

The potential for increased teacher effectiveness and student achievement are listed as primary possibil-
ities of teacher leadership (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2000; Silva, Gimbert, & Nolan, 2000; Smylie & Denny,
1990; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). As teachers expand their roles in the schools, the balance of leadership
responsibilities with administrators, changes; school principals and superintendents who share in the re-
sponsibilities for vision and leadership within the district will find new opportunities for teachers' voices to
be included in myriad decisions. Distributed leadership may effectively use teacher talent to bring about
improvements in teacher effectiveness and student achievement (Mullen & Hutinger, 2008; Ogawa & Bossert,
1995; Smylie & Denny, 1990; Spillane, 2006).

Teacher leadership is the focus of this study, as seen through the eyes of the superintendents. This study
documents the results of a study in which the perceptions of superintendents with regard to their views about
teacher leadership within their districts are analyzed. Currently, the literature about teacher leadership
is dominated by references that name the building principal as central to increasing the opportunities of
expanding the roles of teachers. The important role that superintendents might play in developing initiatives
for district renewal that effectively include teachers as leaders has had little discussion. As executive leaders
of the schools, it is the superintendents who will ultimately set the tone and the vision for district renewal
and growth (Kowalski, 2006).

2 Teacher Leadership

Teacher leadership is viewed as central to the continuous improvement of teaching and learning, with pos-
sibilities for increased student achievement because of that work (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; DiRanna
& Loucks-Horsley, 2000; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Wynne, 2001; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). While the
literature stresses the importance of teachers as leaders, the research in this field is still evolving (Silva,
Gimbert, & Nolan, 2000; Snell & Swanson, 2000). It is recognized that it is the teachers who are ones
who will be enacting the changes in the school that improve their practice and hence, the possibility exists
for them to be well-suited for the leadership and the credibility of the changes (Louis, Kruse, & Raywid,

1996). With the continual calls for improvements to our nation's schools, the need for teacher leadership has undoubtedly never been greater (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

While teachers are perhaps well-suited for leadership roles that include school improvement, they most likely did not enter the profession with the vision of leadership, and the invitation and opportunity to lead is therefore often a result of the culture of the school that encourages their leadership involvement (Quinn, Haggard, & Ford, 2006). However, the teacher of isolation and privacy as described by Lortie (1975) is still largely a reality today; teacher leaders break with that privacy to interact with their colleagues (Snell & Swanson, 2000; Smylie & Denny, 1990). While the literature reports several definitions of teacher leadership, Snell and Swanson (2000) noted that teachers emerged as leaders if they developed strength in pedagogical skills, collaboration in working with colleagues, and reflective practice in which they empowered themselves and others. Thus, the working definition of teacher leadership for purposes of this paper is that teachers actively influence the culture of a school as they gain skill and credibility in their work as master teachers. Therefore, the effective utilization of teachers as leaders demands that teachers move beyond their individual classrooms to interact with colleagues, a move to ultimately influence the larger culture of the school. Teacher leaders may engage in roles that can be facilitated by superintendent influence and support.

3 Superintendents and Teacher Leadership

Because of the dearth of literature regarding the issues of teacher leadership with regard to the superintendent, this study will extrapolate from the literature base about the myriad responsibilities of superintendents and align that information to expand upon the conceptual framework for teacher leadership and distributed leadership. Kowalski (2005) reported two key roles of school superintendents as promoting, "Best practices in school reform, visioning, and planning; and building coalitions and partnerships for improving education" (p.161). Both of these critical tasks demand attention in order to garner the support of teachers to move the initiatives forward. Superintendents, as instructional leaders, are responsible for leading the changes that center on scholastic improvement of students, and the growth of best educational practice of teachers.

Kowalski (2006) further reported, "Effective superintendent leadership is focused on building the capacity of principals, teachers, and parents to improve student learning" (p.208). Superintendents are under considerable pressure to improve the achievement of every student in the district; the transition to the accountability-driven system has flourished in the past decade and media reports of education dominate headlines (Cosner, 2009). In the age of accountability, it is the superintendents who will be articulating the view of change that will bring essential reform to the district.

Daly, (2009) reported on the contradictions that exist as educational leaders negotiate the need for change while responding to legislative acts such as *No Child Left Behind* that are "increasing stress levels and potentially causing a rigid response" (p.168). Daly asserted that trust is a cornerstone of relationships and the potential for improved school improvement may be compromised because of accountability issues. The importance of *collegial trust* in school has been documented as an important distinction of capacity-building work, although little is known about the school leaders' motivation to foster trust building in their districts (Cosner, 2009). Collegial trust includes relationships among teachers, and the relationships that engage educational leaders with the teaching faculty. Superintendents who cultivate and monitor collegial trust in schools will pay particular attention to the interactions with teacher unions. As school district leaders involve teachers as leaders, they will be interacting with teacher union members who might feel ambivalence about these new roles and responsibilities (Smylie, 1990). Koppich (2005) reported,

> In fact, most union locals remain torn. They are fearful that concentrating time and resources on teacher quality issues takes away from what they continue to view as their primary job: protecting members' interests by negotiating the highest salaries, best benefits, and most favorable working conditions possible. Expanding the union's mission to include professional issues is for many unions anathema. (p.91)

Teacher unions play an important role in the conversations about teacher leadership. Poole (2000) reported, "Teacher unions are principal contributors to the overall effectiveness or ineffectiveness of school systems"

(p.94). She reported that union leaders are busy managing complex roles with their members as they respond to the emerging needs of students, along with the increased pressures for unions to change. It is the superintendents who will be negotiating the conversations with teacher unions about the opportunities and responsibilities of teacher leadership. These conversations are crucial to the understanding of how teachers' talents can most effectively be promoted in the school. These discussions may reflect the transitions that are externally or internally motivated and, if deep or dramatic enough, they may disrupt the culture of the school.

It is a delicate balance to move a school forward with regard to school reform initiatives while being respectful of district culture and history. Building capacity of school employees includes a form of work redesign in which teachers are more involved in participative decision-making and school management, including teacher leadership opportunities (Smylie, 1994).

An important element of the educational reform movement in this country has, as important focus, the cultivation of teacher participation in school decision making (Conley, 1991). As superintendents work with reform issues, they will be considering how best to cultivate interest and motivation for the important work of improving student achievement. The push for change may result in additional stress for the superintendent as 98 per cent of superintendents describe their jobs as high stress (Johnson, 2004, p.24). These superintendents may be pushing the limits and history of their districts by these new expectations.

School leaders must be prepared for the high visibility and monitoring of the change efforts, always being out in front of the activities to advocate and define the changes. In this sense the superintendent is the first line of authority and the presence that orchestrates the change efforts. With regard to teacher leadership, it is the superintendent who can champion the efforts of shared leadership, communicate that vision with faculty and the school board members, and provide for support as the principals and leaders work with expanded roles in their schools (Spanneut & Ford, 2008). It was the perceptions of superintendents as they reviewed what was occurring in their districts relative to teacher leadership that was important to this study.

4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine superintendent perceptions of their role in promoting and supporting teacher leadership efforts in their districts to assess what roles teachers played in elementary and secondary schools in their districts. This study was conducted as the third in a series of inquiries about the perceptions of superintendents and principals relative to teacher leadership. As such, this survey contained elements from previous studies that were conducted by the author and two other researchers. For this study, superintendents were asked to participate by completing a survey that was distributed at a national meeting of superintendents.

4.1 Method of the Study

A mixed method survey was used to document the superintendents' perceptions of teacher leadership in their school districts in 2009. A survey was distributed to superintendents in K-12 school districts in a convenience sampling at a national meeting. Twenty-five of the 40 superintendents at this meeting participated in the study.

Construct validity of the survey was previously established by aligning the variables in the survey with the research base of teacher leadership and superintendent job responsibilities. In the judgment of the author, the instrument appeared to measure the theoretical constructs for which it was designed to measure— the various roles that teacher leaders currently enact, along with some of the roles that administrative leaders typically perform.

Part I of the survey asked participants to list demographic information. Part II of the study asked superintendents to rate the importance of superintendent behaviors in cultivating teacher leadership as *highly important*, *moderately important*, or *not important at all*. The respondents were then asked to rate the extent to which they were able to accomplish the same in their districts with options of *almost always*, *sometimes*, or *almost never*. Part III of the survey asked the respondents to indicate the extent of teacher

participation in teacher leader roles for elementary and secondary teachers in their districts, by the following prompts: *not at all, to some degree, a moderate amount,* or *to a great degree*. Part IV was open-ended, containing four questions, and a final prompt that asked for general comments. The survey was designed to measure superintendents' perceptions of the challenges and merits of developing teacher leadership in their districts.

5 Results

The results reported in this study reflect the aggregate of descriptive statistics, with regard to selected questions in the survey, and the analysis of open-ended questions that superintendents completed. Seventy-six percent of the respondents in this study were male, and 24 percent were female. Forty-four percent of respondents listed their district as rural, 24 percent listed suburban, and 12 percent were from urban school districts. With regard to length of time in the superintendency, 12 percent listed five or fewer years of experience in that role, 28 percent reported five to nine years, 24 percent listed nine- 14 years, eight percent indicated 15-19 years, and 20 percent listed 20 plus years of experience; eight percent of respondents did not complete this question.

Eighty-four percent of the respondents indicated that they had unions in their districts and 16 percent reported that they did not. Fifty-two per cent of the superintendents indicated that they used the term *teacher leadership* when referring to the work that teachers completed in their districts, and 48 percent indicated that they did not use that term. When asked how they would rate their interest in promoting teacher leadership in their districts, 60 percent of the superintendents reported that they had a *great degree of interest*, 36 indicated a *moderate interest*, and four percent indicated *some interest*.

The results of the study indicated that teachers are largely performing traditional roles that are associated with teacher leadership, namely, department leaders or chairpersons, mentoring and working with school improvement. The highest means for elementary school teachers (representing halfway between *moderate to a great degree*) were listed as: serving as union representatives, mentoring colleagues, and assisting in curriculum development. The lowest mean was for choosing teaching assignment for peers (indicating that it happened halfway between *not at all to some degree*).

Table 1

Extent of Teacher Leadership in Elementary Schools

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Union Rep	18	3.66	0.84
Mentor	22	3.59	0.79
Curriculum Development	22	3.45	0.85
Data Analysis	22	3.31	0.89
Department Head	20	3.25	1.11
Professional Development	22	3.22	0.92
Problem Solving	22	2.95	0.89
School Improvement	22	2.90	0.97
Peer Teaching Observations	21	2.52	0.92
Budget Decisions	22	2.22	0.92
Choosing Teaching Assignments	22	1.45	0.59
Valid N (listwise)	17		

The highest means for the secondary teachers (representing halfway between *moderate* to *a great degree*) were listed as: union representatives and department head. Similarly, the lowest mean score was for choosing teaching assignment for peers. The lowest mean was for choosing teaching assignment for peers (indicating that it happened halfway between *not at all* to *some degree*). Interestingly, the mean scores for teacher leadership roles were almost identical for elementary and secondary schools.

Table 2

Extent of Teacher Leadership in Secondary Schools

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Union Rep	22	3.63	0.84
Department Head	24	3.50	0.97
Curriculum Development	24	3.45	0.83
Mentor	25	3.40	0.91
Data Analysis	25	3.28	0.93
Professional Development	25	3.28	0.89
Problem Solving	25	3.04	0.84
School Improvement	25	2.88	0.92
Budget Decisions	25	2.36	0.95
Peer Teaching Observations	24	2.29	0.95
Choosing Teaching Assignments	25	1.48	0.58
Valid N (listwise)	20		

The qualitative responses were reviewed by standard format for content and theme, with themes being reviewed for the holistic and context sensitive relationship with the literature on teacher leadership and distributive leadership (Patton, 2002). The themes of the open-ended questions reflect the perceptions of superintendents as to the benefits and challenges of teacher leadership programs in their districts.

The question, *What are the challenges in developing teacher leaders in the schools*, resulted in three themes. The first two themes dealt with superintendents' frustrations in two related areas: the school culture that they felt was unmovable, and the teacher unions, which they viewed as being blockers to the process of developing teachers as leaders. The superintendents reported that teachers did not always see their role as teacher leaders, and thus they did not pursue the formal or informal teacher leadership positions, a theme that is supported in the literature (Smylie & Denny, 1990). A third theme was about dealing with the pressures of time to be able to either have the professional development that would lead to teacher leadership, or to release teachers from classrooms to complete the training for leadership roles.

The question, *What are the benefits of having teacher leaders in the schools,* resulted in a theme about positive change. Superintendents reported that teachers could influence each other to provide improve instruction. They felt that teachers could generate a broad level of support for and be a mediating factor with the administration.

The question, *What are some of the qualities that you associate with the teacher leaders in your district*, resulted in one theme about instructional competence where superintendents defined teacher leaders as master teachers; and a second where they defined the traits of teacher leaders as having strong work ethic, being team players, and serving as positive role models.

The question, *What are some of the changes that need to occur within the culture of the school to encourage teacher leadership*, resulted in another theme of concern about teacher union leadership that is perceived to be reinforcing a culture of status quo. Teacher unions are seen as entities that promote self-interests, typically about work environments and salaries as opposed to the instructional development of teaching, a situation that is seen as paradoxical (Poole, 2000, p.96).

The results of the qualitative data present a pattern of responses that reflect the concerns and opportunities relative to teacher leadership as perceived by superintendents. First, the superintendents in this study view issues of *unions* and *school culture* as being the most critical challenges to developing teacher leadership. The superintendents perceive that teacher leaders are capable of creating a more positive school culture and credible teachers. Superintendents also view the changes associated with teacher leaders positively, with numerous responses about the changes that would occur if the schools had more teacher leaders. When asked how supportive they were of developing teacher leadership in their districts, 96 percent of the superintendents answered between *moderately* to a *great degree*.

6 Discussion

There are several limitations to the generalizability of this study. This was not a random study; it was a convenience sample (N-25) of superintendents who were attending a conference of approximately 40 leaders. As a result, the responses are reflective of this particular group of superintendents and their districts and therefore are not necessarily generalizable to a larger population.

However, while the sample of respondents was small, the results of the study confirm what is known in the literature of teacher leadership, namely, that the changes in culture to adapt a teacher leadership program are fraught with tensions and ambiguity as teachers work with unions to renegotiate roles and responsibilities (Smylie, 1990); that the leadership roles that teachers are currently performing in schools are mostly traditional, with roles such as department chair, or mentoring of new teachers (York-Barr & Duke, 2004); and finally that teacher leaders perform activities that may enhance the school culture (Smylie, 1990; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

The results of this study offer some interesting insights as to how superintendents view the roles of teacher leaders and how these leaders view the challenges that impede progress of expanding the roles of teachers. A question can be asked: *Given the nature of the increased pressures for school reform, and the concerns that superintendents have for the cultural impediments to change, what are the leverages that might ultimately*

lead to increased chance of teacher leadership in the schools?

Answers to this question might be framed in view of the research on educational change and distributed leadership. Fullan (2006) presented information on change theory that informs our approach to school change. He stated that "Most theories of change are weak on capacity building and that is one of the key reasons why they fall short" (p.9). The issue of capacity building is important to the foundation of teacher leadership. Fullan also speaks to the concept of positive pressure that can keep the momentum of the change effort moving forward (p.12). Superintendents are instrumental in building capacity and applying positive pressure, forces that can result in the acceptance of teacher leadership roles. Fullan summarized his findings by stating, "Thus, our theory of action informs us that any strategy of change must simultaneously focus on changing individuals and the culture or system within which they work" (p.7). Superintendents become the optimizers that are out in front of the efforts to change the culture of the school to include enhanced teacher leadership opportunities. Elmore, (2004) agrees; he stated,

> Cultures do not change by mandate; they change by the specific displacement of existing norms, structures, and processes by others; the process of cultural change depends fundamentally on modeling the new values and behavior that you expect to displace the existing ones. (p.11)

Cultural change is slow, deliberate, and formidable and the culture of teaching is one that reinforces privacy and autonomy (Fullan, 2001). Further, the view of teaching as egalitarian is seen by some as an impediment to change (Mujis & Harris, 2003). The redesign of teacher work roles may result in confusion and tension for the teachers who are involved in the changes and those who witness the same. Teacher leaders confront new roles and ambiguities that must be resolved (Smylie & Denny, 1990). As superintendents work with teachers to create new possibilities for collaboration, they can assist in creating the infrastructure that permits expanded roles for teachers, time dedicated for teacher interaction, and continuous work with the culture of the school that places high regard for the professionalism of teaching.

The issue of unionism that surfaced in this study is worthy of further analysis. Kerchner (1986) reported,

> In school districts throughout the country, unions have had to solve the problem of integrating reforms and their activities. Relatively little attention has been paid to the ways in which unions have worked with the reform agenda of school districts and school building. (p.341)

The issue of teacher leadership can be analyzed with regard to teacher union perspectives of educational change, new legislated mandates, and work redesign of teacher roles. The insights that can be generated from these studies can inform superintendents as to the concerns that most resonate with teacher unions, so that these concerns can be mediated.

Further, the extent that superintendents develop systems to support and encourage teacher leadership poses significant implications for the training of school superintendents as well as the development of successful collaborative leadership models within school districts. Superintendents can address complex, systemic change issues that they confront when they commit to full partnership with teacher leaders and the principals who promote collaborative leadership practices in the schools. As teachers become encouraged to lead they develop voice and empowerment, and the culture of the school can begin to change, allowing for the cycle of teacher leadership to grow. While the challenges to changing school culture are considerable, it is the school superintendent who is in a position to be able to promote the vision for change, while building capacity with the faculty.

It seems that we might want to do several things simultaneously; the first is to *recognize.* Talented, high quality teachers are making a positive difference in the lives of their students on a daily basis. As we seek to reform, these are the voices that need to be encouraged to speak and share. Second, is to *act.* We know the issues that are impediments to change, and the importance of the educational leaders who can successfully begin the change process. Superintendents, as transformational leaders, are the ones who will lead change in the schools to be places of excellence; this takes courage and heart. Cultural transformation in a school district is strengthened when the theories of change are followed (Fullan, 2006). Third, is to *believe.* A plan without hope is doomed to despair. Superintendents can *redirect* and *redesign* a future that develops

teacher leadership in their districts by recognizing, acting, and believing; it is superintendents who can give a powerful voice to the vision that includes teachers as leaders.

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