

Unleashing Sustainable Leadership in Schools: The Paradox of Distributed Leadership

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Educational leadership might approach more sustainable practices that allow educators to serve students when employing strategies that focus energy on solutions within the whole of a group of school leaders rather than on the talent of an individual. Situated in the body of research on distributed leadership, this research leverages qualitative data from interviews with leaders in distributed settings to analyze the shifts needed to enact leadership in ways that reach the improvement goals of the school, and delineates how teacher leadership is situated in a distributed frame. Initial findings from an ethnographic study of teacher leaders' roles reveal barriers that may limit the capacity of an educational organization to meet the needs of the learners. The principles of distributed leadership, when approached in school settings, are well suited to the learning goals of these organizations, and may foster not only leadership development, but

increase the longevity of the teaching staff as well, promoting stability in neighborhood schools.

Keywords: educational leadership; distributed leadership; teacher leadership

Educational leadership has been shifting to new forms. Where school leaders were formerly identified by individual traits, emerging research suggests the notion that educational leadership is best understood as it is contextualized in school settings and “stretched” across a group of individuals (Spillane, 2006). This qualitative research explores the lived experiences of 10 teacher leaders as they are situated in new roles designed to increase instructional leadership. The interview data lead to better understandings of distributed leadership, particularly in light the practices of modern school improvement practices. Examination of the “meaning of events and interactions” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 25) characterized the analysis of the data leading to themes that provide insight for this inquiry.

Educational leadership is an essential element in the composition of schools, and increasingly the literature reports indirect, yet powerful influences on student achievement (Leithwood, Louis, et al., 2010). When thinking about leadership as embodied in a formally held position, the parameters of influence seem clear. Leaders shape the actions and thinking of followers. Principals influence teachers and superintendents influence principals. As educational systems became more and more accountable via state and national policy, the scope of responsibility has clearly become more than any one individual can possibly influence. The “heroic” leader, acting alone, cannot manage all of the complex elements in schools today (Murphy, 2002). Educational theorists and researchers have begun to look at the spread of influence over groups of educators to see how the distribution of leadership impacts the actions of those in schools and districts. Within this frame of distributed leadership, the actions of teachers both in their classrooms and within their schools

invite investigation (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Teacher leadership then is situated within the larger frame of the distribution of leadership of the whole of the school leaders.

The teacher leaders who participated in this study held formal roles in their schools or districts as mentors of novice teachers or content area instructional coaches. These accomplished teachers were released from classroom duties in order to focus full time on the adult learning needs of teachers in their schools or districts.

Literature Review

Researchers, scholars, and practitioners have used many terms to describe the way that leadership is spread from a principal to others in a school, including distributed leadership (Gronn, 2000, 2002; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 1999), shared leadership (Lambert, 2002), democratic leadership (Furman & Starratt, 2002) and team leadership or teacher leadership (Barth, 1999; Little, 1999). One essential difference that separates this leadership from the former “heroic” eras is the change from looking at the individual person or traits of a leader to the actions or influence of leadership. Townsend (2011) suggested that:

distributed leadership as one strategy not only for building the capacity of the principal as sole leader of the school, but to ensure that the school as a whole is capable of moving forward by encouraging leadership in others as well. (p. 95)

There are indications of teacher leadership shifts across the globe. De Villiers and Pretorius (2011) reported that since the South African Schools Act of 1996, schools in this country have moved toward a more decentralized model of control from a strong central tradition. The policies in that Act set the stage for more teacher leadership, but do not specify what teacher leadership is or how it could be enacted (Williams, 2011). Although formal instructional leadership roles for teachers have been appearing in U.S. schools (Murphy, 2002), little in the skill set of principals or teachers prepares them for the distribution of leadership

that is intended by these designs. A similar parallel was found in research conducted in Canada. Only 1 in 5 districts reported any action related to increasing the instructional leadership of principals (Leithwood, Louis, et. al., 2010). From Great Britain, Muijs and Harris (2003) noted that schools are beginning to blur the lines between leaders and followers through shared tasks and new opportunities for teachers to lead from time to time.

Distributed leadership can shift schools to develop the practices that influence continuous improvement that are held more widely than in just the principal alone. Sustainable leadership broadens the focus on improving student learning across the span of time that students are in the school. This leverages skills that are not dependent on any one individual member of the school team. This focus on the school team as the location for leadership is a new way of approaching leading for learning. Kennedy, Deuel, Nelson, and Slavit (2011) pointed out that these shifts in leadership at the school and classroom level provide improvement for both students and adults resulting in increased collective responsibility and professionalism. Johnson (2004) reported on a longitudinal study that shows that teachers are more willing to remain in their teaching roles when the focus of the school community is balanced between novice and veteran cultures. It is the very sense of collective responsibility and professionalism that attracts the new generation of teachers to consider teaching for longer than the “try it out for 5 years” mentality. With this in mind, school leaders who seek more sustainable school cultures that support both the students and the adults should consider the layers of capacity that will support this new form of leadership.

Teacher leadership is one facet of distributed practices, and emerges in ways that differ from administrative leadership (Urbanski & Nickolaou, 1997). Fullan (1994) identified six domains of teacher leadership: knowledge of teaching and learning, collegiality, educational context, opportunities for continuous learning, management of change process, and a sense of moral purpose. Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, and Hann (2002) suggested that teacher leadership facilitates principled

action to achieve whole school success. “It applies the distinctive power of teaching to shape meaning for children, youth, and adults. And it contributes to long-term enhanced quality of community life” (p. 10). Mangin and Stoelinga (2008) framed teacher leadership as non-supervisory, centered on instructional improvement through the core technology of teaching, leveraging capacity building centered on student learning, while located at the school level. Lieberman and Miller (2004) identified teacher leaders as those with the capacity to transform schools.

Teacher leadership has begun to develop a strand of literature of its own. A meta-analysis by York-Barr and Duke (2004) delineated many of the traditional forms of teacher leadership. Teachers have served as department heads, union representatives, and mentors to novice teachers. They serve in curriculum and assessment programs. Some of these positions have been formalized by naming the role, or by monetary advantage. A longitudinal study of teachers in the U.S. National Writing Project that centered on data gathered through interviews, and vignette analysis have revealed that teacher leaders do influence the instruction of other teachers (Lieberman & Friedrich, 2007). This connects with the work of Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) who reported that as one facet of distributed leadership, teachers lead within and outside the classroom influencing others to improve their teaching practice and sharing leadership goals. Crowther et al. (2002) chimed in adding that new relationships are developed by teacher leaders with school principals and colleagues enabling a shared vision for improved teaching and learning in the school.

Firestone and Martinez (2007) indicated that the roles that teacher leaders fill and the conditions that undergird their success are dependent on administrative support. The findings of many studies over the last two decades have revealed a richness of benefits of teacher leadership that affect students, parents, schools, teacher colleagues and very importantly, teachers themselves (Muijs & Harris, 2003; Murphy, 2002; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). These include the professionalization of teaching, the strengthening of the school organization, and the promotion of classroom and school improvement.

The increased use of teacher leaders in non-supervisory roles as a strategy for improving student learning creates new opportunities for researchers to examine the phenomenon of teacher leadership (Little, 2003). There are some troubling strains of dilemmas for teacher leaders in the research literature that examines the experience of teacher leaders in these positions of leadership (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Methodology

The purpose of the study was to examine the lived experiences of teacher leaders. Questions that guided the inquiry were: How do teacher leaders make sense of certain formal roles? What are their experiences as they live out the transitional roles of full-time released instructional coach or mentor to novice teacher? From their lived experience, what can we know about the relationships between teachers, teacher leaders, and administrative leaders? Understanding the lived experiences of those who have participated in early implementation may give some insight into this phenomenon. To begin the inquiry into these questions, I conducted a qualitative study of teacher leaders limited to those who had held full-time positions as either instructional coach in a school setting, or as a mentor to novice teacher.

Focusing on the experiences of cultural insiders, this qualitative study utilized phenomenologically oriented, in-depth, open-ended questions as the primary data collection method. A phenomenological approach is appropriate for this study because it focuses on the “meaning of events and interactions” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 25) of teacher leaders and seeks to orient the research toward the lived experience of others.

Ten teacher leaders were identified through the use of purposeful and then snowball sampling initiating with recommendations from the leaders of teacher leader networks. This qualitative study leveraged in-depth interviews that were repeated and used constant comparison as an analytic method. The positionality of the researcher, as a former

mentor and instructional coach, was considered as a potential bias for the research data. Member checking was achieved by inviting the participants to read the transcribed interviews. Several participants participated in analysis and validation of the resulting analysis.

The 10 participants ranged in experience from 12 to 30 years as teachers or in full-time release roles. They spanned the range from elementary classroom teachers, to high school subject specialists, with middle school teachers and two with special education endorsements characterizing the breadth of the participant's experience. Formal teacher leadership roles had been inhabited from 2 to 12 years. Reflecting the demographics of the current teaching population, nine of the participants were women, and though most were European American (White), there was one Asian American participant. The data collected from the interviews yielded rich themes and illustrations of the lived experiences of teacher leaders in these emerging formal roles.

Results

The analysis of data resulted in a number of themes, three that are discussed for the purposes of this article: the nature of the work, relationships in the work place, and sustaining the work.

The Nature of the Work

Characterizing the work of the teacher leader is problematic as many educators do not understand the design or intention of the formal teacher leader roles that have emerged in Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K–12) schools. From many participants, this seemed to be true not only for some of the teachers in their school settings, but also with some administrators as well. In general, the day-to-day work of teacher leaders in formal roles is the work of creating job-embedded staff development that is customized to the teachers with whom they are assigned to work. This is difficult at the outset because it asks for changes in ways that teachers have traditionally worked alone.

What was new to these teacher leaders was the time to be with teachers in classrooms during instruction. Initial training for both mentors and coaches paralleled the clinical supervision that administrators have classically engaged in with teachers during supervisory visits. Mentors and coaches were taught about finding time to conference with teachers before each classroom visit, ways to capture the actions that happen between teacher and students during instruction, and then hold post-observation conferences. This resulted in initial dilemmas in forming working relationships with teachers. Teachers seemed unaware that the teacher leaders were not legally able to contribute to formal evaluations (Revised Code of Washington, 2012). Participants reported difficulty in finding time to meet with teachers, and ways that teachers buffered the teacher leaders from engaging in this review of instruction. Teachers would miss appointments, show up without documents, refuse to return e-mail or phone calls. Instructional coaches and mentors would appear for an agreed-on observation and there would be a “change of plans,” a substitute, or often just another lesson with no explanation.

Part of the construct for teachers and teacher leaders in the relationship area when the formal positions were initially enacted was clearly the element of who in the school supports teachers, and who evaluates them. For teacher leaders in one system, the situation was clearly spelled out in contract language in partnership with the teacher’s union before the roles were enacted. In other schools, this was an unspoken issue. This clearly relayed some initial resistance in the relationships that teacher leaders experienced with their peers. The fact that teacher leaders were trained in a strategy that looked like what administrators were doing was an issue in framing a new way of working together.

One participant, Kris¹ (female), offered writing workshops that centered on elements that the intermediate teachers were working on with their students, and participated as a peer. She offered to co-teach with teachers various aspects of the curriculum that they had worked on in the workshop, and began to change the way that she approached the

work in the classroom. Rather than centering on the one-on-one style of observation that she had been taught, she developed a small-group strategy with her teachers that leveraged their expertise and gave her a more shoulder-to-shoulder look at instruction in each classroom. This strategy began to increase her ability to collaborate with teachers around instruction that was not producing the results in student work they had hoped for. Maggie, another participant, described the way that the old model shifted as a result of new learning on her part:

So at first, we observed and gave feedback, and that didn't feel comfortable at all. So the district brought in a coaching trainer who worked at getting tools in our hands. We worked on how individuals change, how adult learning happens. That adults as learners have communication types and challenges as we go through change. These tools were a gold mine in working with resistant teachers in making changes.

Jeni, a teacher leader, described what she faced in terms of the resistance and her response like this:

It was a tough crowd. I had a lot of hard cases my first year mentoring. They did not want a mentor. Most of them had really unsuccessful management problems. I worked a lot on gathering outside references to these management problems because it seemed to me that if someone else said it, that they were more apt to try it than if I said it.

She further expressed the dilemma that new teachers were situated to look for expertise beyond their peers, and that she was willing to acquiesce to try to meet their perceived needs because of the difficulties she faced. Moving new teachers to a position of being willing to accept support from an expert teacher was not a skill that she has previous to this position.

These teacher leaders described ways of shifting the work when what they had been presented with did not work. Moving away from a model that mirrored administrative practices characterized the patterns of the work of these teacher leaders.

Relationships in the Work Place

“As positions for teacher leaders have multiplied rapidly, it has become clear that these new roles, though promising, are controversial and problematic” (Johnson, cited in Mangin & Stoelinga, 2008, p. xi). The difficulty lies in the ways that new roles challenge long-standing norms in the profession like seniority and autonomy.

Teacher leaders find themselves in new places with both peers and administrators when in these formal roles. The relationships that teacher leaders have with teachers is really based on the trust that teachers need to experience in knowing that the teacher leader is in the classroom to serve as a resource for students, not in the extra hands kind of way, but in the “two heads are better than one” way, reported Julie, a teacher leader. Shared thinking about teaching and learning lead to reflective practices that increased the ability of teachers to meet the academic needs of more students. It was clear from the reports of the teacher leaders that time was a factor in developing these trusting relationships. Teacher leaders who were promoted from within the school were able to move into classroom activities with teachers quickly. Teacher leaders who were new to their school or even new to the district had a much different experience in gaining the trust of teachers in working together in classrooms. For instructional coaches, the ability to leverage some small-group work with teachers accelerated the willingness to open doors to the classroom. Because most mentors were supporting multiple teachers at varying grades and subjects across several buildings, descriptions of relationship building with both teachers and administrators were more strained. Jeni said this:

One [novice] teacher was in tears. Her English classes were out of control, and they were all freshman. I helped her plan and organize and then just begged them [administrators] to let her have a different schedule at the semester, just one class of juniors, not all freshmen. We put a lot of labor into getting her classes moved into the possible range. She is the only teacher I didn't hear from ever again after that year.

The difficulty of advocating for novice teachers to have more reasonable teaching assignments with administrators was a common theme with mentors. This sometimes put mentors at odds with building principals, who they did not see on a regular basis. While they needed the support of the principal, several described the urgency of advocating for better conditions for teachers who inherited the most challenging or least desirable classes, often moved from classroom to classroom, and frequently did not have the materials needed to support the district curriculum. Mentors saw this advocacy as a part of their job, but none of them were prepared for the difficulty this would cause in their relationship with administrators.

Instructional coaches had a different view of working with administrators. Most of the coaches in this were embedded in on building, and positioned as part of the leadership team. Kris related the sessions that her principal led with several coaches on a regular basis:

Some of the best learnings I've ever had are when our leadership team meets with our principal. She asks questions that just make you stop and think about why you're doing what you're doing, and you're just mentally stretched. She shares her own growth in terms of instruction, and helps us all grow.

How teacher leaders impact the instructional leadership of the principal seems at stake. Research and practice both reveal that teachers often lead instructional sessions at the building level when the principal is not the leader of such sessions (Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010; Little, 1999; Park & Datnow, 2009). It is in the partnering and leading with both principals and other teachers that the distribution of leadership moves from “hand off” or “tug of war” to true collaboration that leads to the distribution of leadership throughout the school.

The distribution of instructional leadership between a principal and a teacher leader in a formal role is one that begins with shared understanding of the goals. The teacher leader and principal are partners in supporting changed practices that are more sustainable. The complexity of this relationship is difficult for research to pin down,

and it is in this realm that qualitative research can provide a basis for further understanding. How do principals and teacher leaders see the distribution of leadership?

Sustaining the Work

Sustaining the work of these teacher leaders in full-time roles requires school leaders to fully consider what the roles are established to leverage, and to regularly find ways to increase the capacity of the teacher leader as they fill these roles. Some districts found ways to support the positions after special funding fell away as a result of the perceived impact of the roles. In other cases, roles were ended, and teacher leaders were left wondering how to move forward in a strange career quagmire that left them without a job that matched their skills. One district wrote into the teacher contract language that protected the classroom positions of the teacher leaders when the role ended as a way to protect the career of those willing to take on the risk of serving as a full-time release teacher leader. Jane, a participant of this study, related her view of returning to a classroom:

I got to the point where I was becoming impatient. I had been in other schools and districts where there was no instructional support. As a coach, I tried to work with teachers who are not moving as fast as I would. I would get impatient with teachers who would say “no, too much” and it made me feel really impatient. I felt lots of times some teachers were obliging me, and maybe that’s where my patience ran out, too. So now that I am back in the classroom, I am working with the same teachers that I coached. I still wear the same hat, only now I have my own kids, my own struggles, so I can meld those things together. I think that my role as a teacher leader in the building will make me better.

Several of the participants of this study retired at the end of their service in the full-time role. One moved to a district position supporting other teacher leaders; one moved from serving in one district as a mentor to another district as an instructional coach, and as a result,

determined that serving as a principal would be a reasonable next step. This teacher leader benefited from a pilot program that honored the work of teacher leaders as they prepared for administrative roles. Three participants volunteered to return to classrooms. One of them said that she really had to know if she could do all the things that she was asking teachers to do. Another wanted to leverage all the incredible staff development that had been provided by the district. That teacher leaders returned to classroom positions changed as teachers and leaders was unanimously voiced by these three. Jeni stated: "I couldn't just go back to things the way that they were." Kris relayed: "Think of all that professional development that we had, and what if all teachers had access to that." These are indicators that the teacher leaders valued the benefits that they had learned in the years forging collaborative settings.

If distribution of leadership is viewed more broadly than the actions of teacher leaders in formal roles, then the way that the work changed is part of the evidence. In the situations where teacher leaders began to work with many teachers in small groups and increased collaboration around instructional goals, the intent of the distribution to build capacity that impacted instruction was more evident. Where teachers employed the one-on-one model of meeting with teachers, the impact was more like a leadership hand off. There may be times when this kind of hand off is just what is warranted. This likely releases a principal to use that time for other purposes. The complicating factor is how individual teachers understand the role of supervision as separate. School leaders will leverage the potential of teacher leadership when it is positioned to operate in ways that support more collaboration about instruction.

Teacher leaders need support to learn with each other strategies that allow them to both facilitate group learning and partner with teachers around the core technology of instruction if the dream of distributed leadership is to be realized. More needs to be known about the way that leadership stretches across leaders in a school setting. This one tiny slice of how instructional leadership might look shows that there are both benefits and dilemmas in the way that new patterns of leadership action are emerging. From a systems perspective, administrators need

to consider whether teacher leadership is a hand off or a partnership. How administrators interact with teacher leaders would lend light on this aspect of the equation and is a clear area for future inquiry.

There are a few recommendations that come from this look at the literature and one small research study. First, we can start with educator preparation focused on distributed leadership. Stewart's (2012) research on undergraduate teachers suggests that teacher leadership may be nurtured early in the development of a teacher's career trajectory by participation in school-based projects that incorporate elements of servant leadership. Second, we can support leadership preparation with examples of capacity building leadership. Examine teacher leadership initiatives for elements that build capacity in a more sustainable manner. Greenleaf (1977) asked these questions:

Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived? (p. 7)

Recommendations from Kennedy et al. (2011) remind us that supporting teacher leadership is a valuable way of making forward motion in improving instruction. Teacher groups find that it takes time for functional collaboration to emerge. When teacher inquiry is centered on student learning, the dialogue and inquiry that emerge create a culture of teacher leadership. Then these formal roles in teacher leadership may be a transition to new forms of distributed leadership that are more sustainable.

Educators who want to approach sustainability in the realm of school leadership must consider the complexity of implementation in this new wave of school leadership practices. Though distributed leadership and its subset, teacher leadership, likely hold promise for improving school leadership practice, there are many dilemmas inherent in implementation (Wright, 2008). Some forms of leadership may impact the democratic nature of distributed leadership, and formal roles

for teacher leaders may be examples of this dilemma. The power differential between teachers and administrators is very real and difficult to overcome, even when the leadership model is based on collective practices. Framing any form of teacher leadership in the same mold as administrative functions begs the question of the same dilemma of a power differential.

A paradox of distributed leadership for sustainable schools is that when leaders let go of previously held leadership practices, many capable teacher leaders will be empowered to act, distributing the leadership to many more who can take action. When leaders are willing to shift to new approaches, the influence that they have will multiply studied action in the school. “The influence of a school principal can be seen as increasing in both the density and intensity when distributed forms of leadership are employed” (Leithwood, Louis, et al., 2010, p. 615). The more tightly leadership is held, the less influence that the leader has. The more willing the leader is to invite others into leadership, the more leadership is ascribed to that leader. The likelihood that school problems can be solved with more sources of input in both identification and solutions increases with the wise use of leadership practices.

Note

1. Participant names in this article are pseudonyms.

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