



**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**THE LEADERSHIP QUALITIES AND SKILLS OF TEACHERS IN SCHOOLS**

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**ABSTRACT**

**Article History:**

Received 7<sup>th</sup> Sep, 2016

Received in revised form 15.10.2016

Accepted 15.10.2016

Published on 02.Dec.2016

**Keywords:** *professional restlessness, leadership itch, Teacher Leadership*

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In every good school, there are teachers whose vision extends beyond their own classrooms - even beyond their own teams or departments. Such teachers recognize that students' school experiences depend not only on interaction with individual teachers, but also on the complex systems in place throughout the school and district. This awareness prompts these teachers to want to influence change. They experience professional restlessness - what some have called the "leadership itch." Sometimes on their own initiative and sometimes within a more formal structure, these professionals find a variety of ways to exercise teacher leadership.

Teacher Leadership today more than ever, a number of interconnected factors argue for the necessity of teacher leadership in schools.

**Introduction**

**Teaching is a flat profession.**

In most professions, as the practitioner gains experience, he or she has the opportunity to exercise greater responsibility and assume more significant challenges. This is not true of teaching. The 20-year veteran's responsibilities are essentially the same as those of the newly licensed novice. In many settings, the only way for a teacher to extend his or her influence is to become an administrator. Many teachers recognize that this is not the right avenue for them. The job of an administrator entails work that does not interest them, but they still have the urge to

exercise wider influence in their schools and in the profession. This desire for greater responsibility, if left unfulfilled, can lead to frustration and even cynicism.

**Teachers' tenure in schools is longer than that of administrators.**

In many settings, administrators remain in their positions for only three to four years, whereas teachers stay far longer. Teachers often hold the institutional memory; they are the custodians of the school culture. School districts that want to improve

make a wise investment when they cultivate and encourage teacher leaders, because they are in a position to take the long view and carry out long-range projects.

**The demands of the modern principalship are practically impossible to meet.**

Principals today are expected to be visionaries (instilling a sense of purpose in their staff) and competent managers (maintaining the physical plant, submitting budgets on time), as well as instructional leaders (coaching teachers in the nuances of classroom practice). In addition, the principal has become the point person for accountability requirements imposed by states and the federal government, and he or she must respond to multiple stakeholders (parents, staff members, the district central office, and the larger community). Under such pressure from a range of sources, many administrators simply cannot devote enough time and energy to school improvement.

**Principals have limited expertise.**

Like all educators, most principals have their own areas of instructional expertise. A principal who was formerly a mathematics teacher may know a lot about research-based instructional practices in math, but not much about instruction in world languages. The school administrator cannot be an expert in everything. Individual teachers, of course, have their own particular areas of knowledge, but a group of teacher leaders can supply the variety of professional knowledge needed for sustained school improvement.

Given these factors, school improvement depends more than ever on the active involvement of teacher leaders. School administrators can't do it all.

**Qualities and Skills of Teacher Leaders**

Teacher leaders serve in two fundamental types of roles: formal and informal. **Formal teacher leaders** fill such roles as department chair, master teacher, or instructional coach. These individuals typically apply for their positions and are chosen through a selection process. Ideally, they also receive training for their new responsibilities. Formal teacher

leaders play vital roles in most schools. In many cases, these teacher leaders manage curriculum projects, facilitate teacher study groups, provide workshops, and order materials. They may also evaluate other teachers, in which case their colleagues are likely to regard them as pseudo administrators.

**Informal teacher leaders**, in contrast, emerge spontaneously and organically from the teacher ranks. Instead of being selected, they take the initiative to address a problem or institute a new program. They have no positional authority; their influence stems from the respect they command from their colleagues through their expertise and practice.

Whether they are selected for a formal leadership role or spontaneously assume an informal role, effective teacher leaders exhibit important skills, values, and dispositions. Teacher leaders call others to action and energize them with the aim of improving teaching and learning. As Michael Fullan writes, the litmus test of all leadership is whether it mobilizes people's commitment to putting their energy into actions designed to improve things. It is individual commitment, but above all it is collective mobilization.<sup>1</sup>

A hallmark of leadership, therefore, is the ability to collaborate with others. Teacher leaders must enlist colleagues to support their vision, build consensus among diverse groups of educators, and convince others of the importance of what they are proposing and the feasibility of their general plan for improvement. They must be respected for their own instructional skills. They also must understand evidence and information and recognize the need to focus on those aspects of the school's program that will yield important gains in student learning.

A number of values and dispositions make certain individuals ideally suited for teacher leadership. Effective teacher leaders are open-minded and respectful of others' views. They display optimism and enthusiasm, confidence and decisiveness. They persevere and do not permit setbacks to derail an important initiative they are pursuing. On the other hand, they are flexible and

willing to try a different approach if the first effort runs into roadblocks.

Many attributes of good teacher leaders are fundamentally the same as the attributes of good teachers: persuasiveness, open-mindedness, flexibility, confidence, and expertise in their fields. Despite these similarities, however, working with colleagues is profoundly different from working with students, and the skills that teachers learn in their preparation programs do not necessarily prepare them to extend their leadership beyond their own classrooms. To assume a leadership role, they may need expertise in curriculum planning, assessment design, data analysis, and the like. They may also need to develop the abilities to listen actively, facilitate meetings, keep a group discussion on track, decide on a course of action, and monitor progress. These skills are not typically taught in teacher preparation programs.

### **What Do Teacher Leaders Do?**

Three main areas of school life benefit from the involvement of teacher leaders (see “Where Teacher Leaders Extend Their Reach”). In each area, this involvement may take place within the teacher leader's own department or team, across the school, or beyond the school. No setting is more “advanced” than another; each has its own requirements and calls on its own particular skills and inclinations.

### **Within the Department or Team**

Leading change within one's own department or team may require considerable interpersonal skill and tact. The success of such an effort also depends on the teacher leader's has established credibility and trust with his or her colleagues.

Leadership at this level can take many forms. Teacher leaders may coordinate a program in which students in the 6th grade read to kindergarten students during their lunch period. Or they may invite their colleagues to examine the reasons for student underperformance in writing. In many different ways, teacher leaders mobilize the efforts of their closest colleagues to enhance the school's program for the benefit of students. For example, William, a

middle school math teacher, brought a situation to his 6th grade teaching team, asking for their thoughts. He had noticed that many of the girls in his class were not participating in group activities as enthusiastically as he expected.

One of William's colleagues offered to visit his class and see whether she could help him understand the situation better. She observed several classes and took notes on what she saw and heard: the nature of the activities students were asked to do, types of questions the teacher and students asked, interactions among the students, and so on.

What she observed was stunning: William, unknown to himself, was not challenging the girls in the class as much as the boys: When a girl encountered difficulty, he supplied the answer or a significant “hint”; he called on the boys more frequently than the girls to answer challenging questions; and he was more likely to encourage the boys to challenge one another's thinking about the math problems. William was astonished at his colleague's findings and set about changing his behavior. His approach to this situation revealed extraordinary openness and courage. He and his colleague reported their findings and William's plan for action to the rest of the team. Soon, other teachers on the 6th grade team set about systematically assisting one another with similar questions and situations, as well as bringing the results back to the team for discussion.

**Across the School:** Some of the most powerful opportunities for teacher leadership relate to areas that have enormous influence on the daily lives of students across the school, such as the master schedule, grading policy, or student programs. For example, many students experience the most memorable activities of their school careers through participating in the school play, being on the debate team, or taking an advanced class that enables them to engage deeply with academic content. Ensuring that students have full access to such opportunities involves a collective effort, requiring discussion and consideration of alternatives. This is the work of leadership. And although administrators play an

important facilitative role, teachers—who are closer to the action—frequently put forward important ideas and can assume a leadership role.

Grading policies also have a profound effect on how students experience their learning activities. Jennifer, a high school history teacher, found herself troubled by her students' responses to tests and papers. She read their work carefully and provided thoughtful feedback. But when she returned their papers, the students seemed interested only in the grade; some never even read her careful comments. Also, she noticed that some students would decline to turn in work altogether if they knew it was going to be late, believing that it was not “worth it” to complete it.

Jennifer invited interested teachers from across the school to join her in exploring alternate approaches to grading. The teachers met for an entire school year, and each of them conducted systematic discussions with their students. Toward the end of the year, the group made a recommendation to the entire faculty; as a result, the school piloted a different grading system the following year that incorporated formative assessment and student self-assessment. At the end of three years, the school's approach to grading was considerably different; the teachers were convinced that the new system resulted in greater student buy-in and commitment to high-quality work.

**Beyond the School:** Teacher leaders contribute beyond their own school when they participate in a district wide teacher evaluation committee or curriculum team, make a presentation at a state or national conference, serve on a state standards board, or speak at a school board meeting as the voice of teachers in the community. Again, these teachers are doing more than teaching their own students (as brilliant as they may be in that work); they are influencing the larger education environment in their communities and perhaps their states.

For example, Maria, a high school Spanish teacher, noticed that there weren't good opportunities for her to meet with and learn from other Spanish teachers in the area. The state organization of

language teachers had not recruited many members in her school or in neighboring schools.

Maria decided to begin a chapter of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese in her area. She sent e-mail notices to teachers in other schools and scheduled an organizational meeting. Although response was slow at first, over the course of several years the chapter became vibrant. Before long, members were scheduling visits to one another's schools and preparing presentations for the state conference.

### **Conditions that Promote Teacher Leadership**

Not every school is hospitable to the emergence of teacher leaders, particularly informal teacher leaders. The school administrator plays a crucial role in fostering the conditions that facilitate teacher leadership, including the following:

#### **A safe environment for risk taking**

Teachers must be confident that administrators and other teachers will not criticize them for expressing ideas that might seem unusual at first. Some of the most effective approaches to solving difficult issues in schools may not be intuitively obvious but may require that educators think creatively, which can only happen in a safe environment. School administrators should make it clear that teachers are safe to express ideas and take professional risks. For example, a principal could raise discussion questions at a staff meeting: What would make the professional environment safe in our school? How would it be similar to the climate you create in your own classrooms? Following the establishment of these professional norms, the principal could schedule a brief, but regular, time at staff meetings for “wacko ideas,” during which any teacher could propose doing something different.

#### **Administrators who encourage teacher leaders.**

Administrators' commitment to cultivating teacher leaders plays an essential role in their development. Administrators must be proactive in helping teachers acquire the skills they need to take advantage of opportunities for leadership (data analysis, meeting facilitation, and so on).

Unfortunately, some administrators jealously guard their turf, apparently fearing that ambitious teacher leaders will somehow undermine their own authority. In fact, one of the enduring paradoxes of leadership is that the more an administrator shares power, the more authority he or she gains.

**Absence of the “tall poppy syndrome.** It's not only administrators who, on occasion, stand in the way of teacher leaders. Sometimes the teachers themselves resist taking on leadership roles, or make it difficult for their colleagues to do so. In Australia, this is called the tall poppy syndrome—those who stick their heads up risk being cut down to size. This phenomenon might take the form of teachers' reluctance to announce to their colleagues that they have been recognized by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. To counteract this syndrome, the school administrator needs to create a culture that honors teachers who step outside their traditional roles and take on leadership projects.

**Opportunities to learn leadership skills.** As noted earlier, the skills required for teacher leadership are not part of the preparation program for most teachers. If teacher leaders are to emerge and make their full contribution, they need opportunities to learn the necessary skills of curriculum planning, instructional improvement, assessment design, collaboration, and facilitation. Teachers can learn these skills through school-level professional development, of course, but they may also build these skills through district wide or university-based courses and seminars. Whatever the source, the opportunities must be available and sufficiently convenient for teachers to take advantage of them.

### **The Need for Teacher Leadership**

Teacher leadership is an idea whose time has come. The unprecedented demands being placed on schools today require leadership at every level. Yet many schools are still organized as though all the important decisions are made by administrators and carried out by teachers. In the most successful schools, teachers supported by administrators take initiative to improve school wide policies and programs, teaching and learning, and

communication. By understanding the phenomenon of teacher leadership and helping teachers develop the skills required to act as leaders, we will improve schools and help teachers realize their full potential.

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