KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF TEACHER LEADERS IN SCHOOLS

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Teacher leaders who share their specialized knowledge, expertise, and experience with other teachers broaden and sustain school and classroom improvement efforts. Teacher leaders can transform classrooms into learning laboratories where every student is engaged in relevant and well-designed curricular content, every teacher embraces the use of more effective instructional strategies, and authentic assessments provide evidence of rich student learning. This work describes four essentialities associated with teacher leaders: a focus on student learning, along with the importance of empowerment, relationships, and collaboration. In addition to gleaning insights from the literature, examples of the impact of teacher leaders in schools are provided to demonstrate the importance of each.

Keywords: *teacher leaders, student learning, school improvement, empowerment, relationships, collaboration*

Teacher leadership is not a new concept. Rather, the call for teacher leaders to help improve the K-12 educational system is approaching half a century of existence. Silva, Gimbert, and Nolan (2000) identify three evolutionary stages of teacher leadership. In the first stage, schools appointed teacher leaders to serve as department heads or master teachers with the emphasis on controlling other teachers. This managerial role in effect neutered other teachers, thus undermining what might have been accomplished. In the second stage, teacher leaders became instructional leaders or curriculum developers. While some benefits emerged, these roles set teacher leaders apart from their colleagues and lessened the impact on overall educational enhancement. In the third stage, teacher leaders worked with peers to improve professional practice by doing things they might not otherwise do, such as redesigning schools, mentoring colleagues, solving school-wide problems, and engaging in professional development activities. In this most recent and current iteration, the teacher leader has taken on a collaborative role.

> According to this conceptualization of teacher leadership, teacher leaders would "slide the doors open" to collaborate with other teachers, discuss common problems, share approaches to various learning situations, explore ways to overcome structural constraints of limited time, space, resources, and restrictive policies, or investigate motivational strategies to bring students to a deeper engagement with their learning. (Silva et al., 2000, p. 781)

Teacher leaders who collectively share with colleagues their specialized knowledge, expertise, and experience can help principals broaden and sustain school and classroom improvement efforts. Developing the leadership capabilities of teachers to serve as mentors, instructional coaches, and facilitators in myriad ways should be a top priority and occur through continual professional development. To help each school fulfill its mission and energize and expand the professionalism and professional contributions of teachers, the expertise of all teachers, and especially teacher leaders, is needed. Teacher leaders working with colleagues can transform schools and classrooms into learning laboratories where every student participates in relevant and well-designed curriculum, benefits from learner-centered instructional strategies, and completes authentic assessments to show evidence of learning.

Who are teacher leaders? They are experienced and respected role models, who are innovative, organized, collaborative, trustworthy, and confident facilitators of learning. They model integrity, have strong interpersonal and communication skills, display the highest level of professionalism, a commitment to students, and expertise, and demonstrate a passion for student learning, while taking the initiative as influential change agents (Bowman, 2004; Danielson, 2006; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Muijs & Harris, 2003; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Teacher leaders use data and other evidence in making decisions, recognize opportunities and take the initiative, mobilize people around a common purpose, identify resources and take action, monitor progress and adjust the approach as conditions change, sustain the commitment of others, and contribute to a learning organization (Danielson, 2006). Teacher leaders may be district appointed staff who fulfill specified roles of leadership, like instructional coaches, or they may be confident teachers who naturally assume or are asked to lead their grade level or department team members.

The purpose of this work is to describe four essentialities associated with teacher leaders: focus on student learning, empowerment, relationships, and collaboration (See Figure 1). In addition to gleaning insights from the literature, examples will be provided to demonstrate the importance of each.
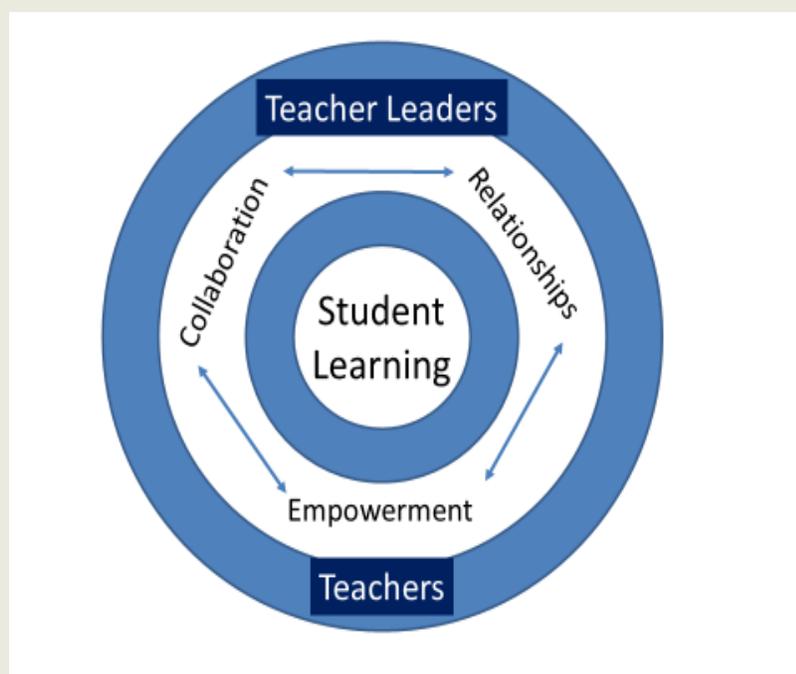

Figure 1. Four Ways Teacher Leaders Impact other Teachers

FOCUS ON STUDENT LEARNING

Everyone who studies, works, and leads in schools emphasizes the quality of teaching as the key to student learning. Danielson (2006) affirms, "It is well recognized, but little acted upon, that the greatest professional resource available in every school is the expertise of its teachers" (p. 55). The benefits of tapping into and capitalizing on this expertise have not been fully realized because teachers traditionally work behind closed classroom doors with their individual knowledge and instructional strategies observed only by their students. What is needed, argue Bowman (2004), Brooks, Scribner, and Eferakorho (2004), and Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001), are teachers and teacher leaders focusing on student success. Administrators cannot provide all the leadership necessary to resolve the mammoth challenges facing schools. To be effective, administrators must unleash the leadership and instructional expertise of the teachers who know the most about what works in classrooms to help students learn (Danielson, 2006). Teacher leaders are an invaluable resource in this context because each teacher leader "emphasizes a focus on students, collaborative work with teachers, and a commitment to ongoing learning" (Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010, p. 95).

Margolis and Huggins (2012) affirm how the unprecedented demands on the educational system require teacher leaders who can help schools enact ambitious, classroom-level reforms and that teacher leaders who can help all teachers engage in classroom-based inquiry are central to the success of schools in helping every child learn. They

recommend the use of a hybrid model of teacher leaders who remain in the classroom part of the time and provide professional development for other teachers the remainder of their time. These hybrid teacher leaders can conduct one-on-one coaching sessions with colleagues, observe classes and provide feedback, model effective instruction, help write curriculum, and share instructional resources. They facilitate changes focusing on student learning.

Barth (2001), Gordon (2004), and Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) suggest every teacher harbors leadership capabilities that can and should be unlocked to the benefit of students. Lambert (2003) agrees, saying, "all teachers have the right, capability and responsibility to be leaders, therefore, the major challenge before us is not to identify who is and who is not a teacher leader but to create a context that evokes leadership from all teachers" (p. 422).

Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) emphasize the role of teacher leaders in professional learning communities (PLCs) with the overarching goal of student learning. The success of PLCs requires principals and other school administrators to share power, authority, and decision- making with teachers. Another dimension is the identification of student needs, followed by the development and implementation of instructional strategies to address these needs. A supportive culture for PLCs requires time, financial resources, constructive feedback, and recognition of improved professional practices. In addition, successful use of PLCs requires that staff receive sufficient and consistent training to develop an understanding of the purpose and power of the PLCs. When empowered teacher leaders facilitate the implementation of PLCs, schools can be transformed and student learning increased. These PLCs lead to participatory decision-making, a shared sense of purpose, collaborative work, and joint responsibility for outcomes (Muijs & Harris, 2003). Reason and Reason (2007) add, "Creating a professional learning community encourages teams of teacher leaders to help one another grow and evolve as leaders and learners" (p. 39).

At some campuses, principals are providing half-day substitutes for a grade level planning PLC to occur, enabling teachers to meet with instructional coaches to "unpack" new standards and engage in professional dialogue about effective instructional delivery, reflect on best practices, and collaboratively plan impactful lessons using identified resources. This PLC opportunity affords teachers time to collaborate under the guidance of instructional teacher leaders, with the end goal being improvement in student mastery.

At one elementary campus in a large suburban district in Texas, PLCs are implemented to provide educators with high levels of planning and integration of research-based instructional strategies aligned with state standards so that every action in the classroom is data-driven and intentional. All PLCs begin with teachers revisiting core values of the school that focus educators on the shared goal of student mastery. Each PLC member presents data from his or her individual classroom data binder with review of assessments, observations, guided instruction, and student-centered instructional goals. Teachers then collaboratively celebrate student growth and target areas of needed instruction. Additionally, team members analyze shared data to determine which teachers are the most effective in instructing students in specific targeted areas. Students are grouped across classrooms and shared among teachers to ensure each student receives the needed instruction for success. In this type of PLC, every team member assumes a different leadership role. Each team member is expected to draw from his or her individual talents to lead the team. For example, one teacher might lead through a finely tuned ability to analyze data and use it to drive the team's whole-group and small-group instruction; another member of the PLC might demonstrate an ability to lead the team in the creation of assessments that will help the team gauge student mastery; and yet another teacher may lead by staying current with the latest research on technology integration and train the team on these research-based best practices. Each teacher leader or expert in a certain area facilitates professional growth on a "horizontal" level, and then further leads by participating in campus vertical or cross-curricular teams associated with his or her area of leadership. There is an opportunity for multiple individuals to hone their leadership skills, impact a broader audience, and strengthen the unity of the entire campus structure. This strength greatly enhances the outcomes of the PLC process when each member assumes some level of leadership responsibility to benefit the whole group.

As teachers use their professional knowledge and pursue leadership opportunities, their lives are enriched and energized while their students learn more (Barth, 2001; Danielson, 2007). Through a shared commitment to student learning, teachers embrace opportunities to provide and accept instructional coaching and mentoring and become teacher leaders. Through PLCs and other operational strategies, teachers build partnerships. A key to these partnerships is empowerment, which is discussed in the next section.

EMPOWERMENT

Individual empowerment of teachers is a central tenet in teacher leadership, with increased improvement in teaching and learning resulting in greater student achievement (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Congruency between a school's mission and the values of teachers will result in greater buy-in if they participate in the establishment of curricular, instructional, and assessment goals. When teachers embrace these goals, they are more likely to accept varying levels of leadership responsibility, commit to ongoing professional development, and help shape systemic and sustainable change in improved educational practice to benefit all students.

School administrators need to unleash the largely untapped resource of teacher leadership in the support of school change (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001). As concluded by Barth (2001) and Lambert (2003), every teacher has the potential to lead in a variety of roles leading to school improvement, especially when teachers benefit from continuing educational development. As such, schools must invest in their most important resources, their teachers (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001). They propose a four-part model for teacher leader development: personal assessment (Who am I?), changing schools (Where am I?), influencing strategies (How do I lead?), and planning for action (What can I do?). Additionally, they offer the following concrete ideas for teacher leadership development:

- Shorten faculty meetings with less administrative procedures and announcements.
- Require professional growth plans instead of annual evaluations.
- Provide on-going professional development throughout the school year (and beyond).
- Eliminate duplicative and unnecessary paperwork.
- Cover classes using administrators and volunteers to free up teachers to meet, collaborate, and plan.
- Pool classes of students occasionally to free up teachers to meet, collaborate, and plan.
- Engage students in community service projects and learning activities to free up teachers to meet, collaborate, and plan.
- Schedule common planning periods by grade level or content area.
- Use block scheduling.
- Adopt a year-round calendar.
- Extend instruction on four days and reduce on one day.
- Increase class sizes by one or two students to free up an instructional support teacher.

Brooks et al. (2004) and Heck and Hallinger (2009) recommend principals practice distributed leadership, which requires principals to empower teachers to work collaboratively toward the goal of school improvement. Sustainable reform in schools requires empowered leadership at all levels of the system. Distributed leadership leads to "a sustained focus on strategies aimed at the improvement of teaching and learning (e.g., fostering curricular standards and alignment, developing instruction, providing tangible support for students, improving professional capacity, sustaining a focus on academic improvement)" (Heck & Hallinger, 2009, p. 681).

A teacher at a suburban district near Houston, Texas, where educators experience a high level of empowerment states, "The foundation upon which our school is built stems from a 'we' not 'I' mentality. Collaboration and caring are the cornerstone of all we do here." She continues by explaining that teacher leaders are continuously looking for ways to involve the whole campus and parent population as well as developing leadership in students to build an educationally nurturing community. Ultimately, when every member of the school community feels empowered, the end result is positive school change.

Birdville Independent School District (ISD), a suburban district in Texas, has created a campus leadership platform called Leaders of Learners (LOL). This group functions as the voice of change at each campus, in which teachers work alongside administrators to disaggregate multiple data, identify problems of practice and collaboratively design solutions for improvement. One of the goals of this platform is to analyze organizational health to create a culture of

transparency. This model empowers teachers to embrace school-wide change by actively engaging in the campus improvement process.

When principals empower teachers by sharing decision-making, teachers become more willing to think divergently, accept responsibility for change, embrace opportunities to help all students learn, and solve problems collaboratively. The principal needs to search for hidden teacher leadership talents, nurture these talents, and empower teacher leaders to flourish. Principals must create time for teacher leaders, develop interdependent teaching roles, give teachers a voice in decisions, and foster opportunities to expand their expertise. Teacher leadership, to be successful, should not be extra-instructional endeavors. Teacher leaders facilitate the building of relationships as emphasized in the next section.

RELATIONSHIPS

To optimally build relationships, Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) suggest that "emotionally intelligent leaders attract talented people — for the pleasure of working in their presence" (p. 11). Teacher leaders possess emotional intelligence, which according to Goleman et al. (2002) encompasses personal and social competence and demonstrates the ability to manage oneself and one's relationships with others. Teacher leaders with strengths in the four domains of emotional leadership expand their personal leadership abilities while helping peers expand their expertise in these four domains. First, an understanding of emotional and cognitive self-awareness leads to a recognition of how that awareness impacts their decision making and behaviors. Teacher leaders have an accurate self-assessment, which includes knowing one's strengths and limitations, resulting in greater self-confidence, self-worth, and self-efficacy. Second, through self-management, disruptive emotions and impulses remain under control; honesty, integrity, and trustworthiness are readily evident; flexibility in adapting to changing situations or obstacles is demonstrated; personal standards of excellence in performance are met; and optimism leads to seeing the positive in whatever happens. Third, social awareness embodies empathy and understanding for others' emotions, perspectives, and concerns. It also demonstrates an awareness of organizational politics and how to meet the needs of those impacted by organizational events. Fourth, teacher leaders through relationship management, guide and motivate with a compelling vision, influence peers persuasively, bolster the abilities of other teachers through feedback and mentoring, resolve disagreements, build bonds by cultivating and maintaining relationships, and facilitate teamwork and collaborations. Central to each of these four domains of emotional intelligence are the values inherently characteristic of teacher leaders. Goleman et al. (2002) conclude:

> The greater a leader's skill at transmitting emotions, the more forcefully the emotions will spread….the more open leaders are — how well they express their own enthusiasm, for example — the more readily others will feel that same contagious passion. Leaders with that kind of talent are emotional magnets; people naturally gravitate to them. If you think about the leaders with whom people most want to work in an organization, they probably have this ability to exude upbeat feelings. (p. 11)

Rather than number of degrees held, good looks, or salary, Scott (2009) claims, "Your most valuable currency is relationship, emotional capital, the ability to connect with others" (p. 77). Teachers readily agree the success of teacher leaders rests heavily upon emotional intelligence and the necessity of facilitating connections personally and professionally with colleagues.

Teacher leaders enlist the interest and involvement of other teachers when building relationships with them. To sustain the commitment of others, however, Danielson (2006) states that teacher leaders need facilitation and group-process skills, such as listening, joint problem-solving, and honoring other people's ideas. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) suggest listening skills encompass focusing on the speaker without judging or formulating a response, using open body language, trying to see through the other person's eyes through empathy, and examining nonverbal cues and exploring words for meaning and feeling.

One elementary school has designed a set of core values to strengthen relationships within the school community, thus fostering more productive use of shared time and deeper relationships among teachers. These core values express a commitment to educational excellence, a focus on prized relationships, collaborative community, an attitude of gratitude, and intentional loyalty. Each of these five core values is further defined with specific attributes

that exemplify the characteristic. For example, concerning relationships, the core value document states that teachers will actively celebrate the greatness in all members of the school family, demonstrated by being kind and respectful of others. School administrators ask faculty to quietly read these core values at the beginning of every PLC, or other meetings for which teachers gather, to help them internalize these concepts and implement them into daily practice. Additionally, a student-friendly version of the core values is taught to students through once-a-week reading over the announcements and focusing weekly on specific attributes highlighting and demonstrating these values in the classroom. In this way, the core values leap from the pages of the document into actual practice in the lives of teachers, enabling each educator to become a model of relational leadership as well as in the other core areas.

Teacher leaders, suggest Silva et al. (2000), navigate the structures of schools, nurture relationships, encourage professional growth, help others with change, and challenge the status quo. They develop positive relationships through their flexibility, approachability, modeling, and expertise and become change agents by helping colleagues grow and develop systemically through collective investigation and incorporation of research-based instructional strategies. Educators who focus on building relationships demonstrate respect for different perspectives and individuals. Other characteristics of effective teacher leaders include listening to and honoring the knowledge and abilities of peers, while emphasizing that it takes an entire school community to transform the learning environment into one that nurtures all students. Teacher leaders nurture relationships by being positive models of hope who can navigate through the challenges of school change by demonstrating strength and a firm belief in the evolving system. These strong relationships nurtured by teacher leaders also require collaboration as discussed next.

COLLABORATION

There has been a general consensus among previous researchers that teacher leaders serve as change agents inside and outside classrooms by improving educational practice through working collaboratively with colleagues (Muijs & Harris, 2003). As such, effective teacher leaders develop trusting and collaborative relationships (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Possibly the most important dimension in forging close relationships with individual teachers occurs through mutual learning (Muijs & Harris, 2003). As Silva et al. (2000) conclude, "Teachers can only become leaders within schools when the school culture is clearly committed to providing support for the learning of all its members" (p. 802).

Schools can elicit full engagement of teachers and their leadership capabilities through opportunities for skillful participation, inquiry, dialogue, and reflection (Lambert, 2003). Teachers are energized and engaged most productively with their colleagues as they develop their expertise. For example, when teachers collaboratively plan the curriculum, talk about their instructional approaches, assess personal and student successes, and work on problems or new initiatives, their students benefit (Beachum & Dentith, 2004). Teacher leaders facilitate this collegial process by modeling quality instruction and collaboratively setting high expectations for all teachers (Kelehear & Davison, 2005). Teacher leaders work with other teachers to focus their time and energy on investigating and utilizing effective instructional strategies (Wasley, 1991). Muijs and Harris (2003) add that teacher leaders build trust and rapport with colleagues while building skills and confidence in others.

One way these collaborative outcomes can be operationalized is through coaching and mentoring. Lambert (2003) states, "The mentoring process involves coaching and feedback, modeling, provision for leadership experiences, training, and participation in arenas outside of the classroom and school" (p. 427). Through these developmental activities, teachers build their identities as leaders and demonstrate these informally and formally (Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010).

When collaboration is deeply rooted in the campus culture, classroom transparency becomes the norm. Teachers adopt an attitude of "all our students," rather than "just my 20 students." This prompts teacher leaders to open their classrooms and informally share with teammates the driving force behind their students' success. For example, they offer ideas, time, and resources throughout the school day or even outside of the school day, often volunteering to guide other teachers step-by-step in enhancing their instructional practice. These teacher leaders unselfishly give of their time to ensure colleagues are growing. In casual and informal ways, teacher leaders make themselves approachable and available at any opportunity to generously share their expertise and experience while providing positive feedback and encouragement. These interactions often occur before or after school, spontaneously while passing in the hallway, while out at recess, and during lunch breaks or planning periods. This type of teacher leader

understands the need for growth outside the four walls of his or her classroom and jumps full force into the role of informally leading colleagues through small, but meaningful, conversations that encourage growth.

In a formal collaboration-building model utilized by Birdville ISD, instructional coaches assume the role of teacher leaders to mentor both experienced and new teachers through lesson modeling, shared dialogue, and reflection. The primary role of these coaches is to cultivate an environment focused on research-based, best practice for Tier I instruction and facilitate the growth of each classroom teacher. These coaches work alongside teachers to analyze data, intentionally plan specific lessons that both address the curriculum and meet differentiated student needs. They also facilitate dialogue during the PLC process to bolster each teacher's confidence in instructional practice. This model of collaboration results in improved teacher and student performance through higher quality instruction.

The emphasis remains on collegial relationships that "affirm other teachers' expertise and accomplish positive outcomes for their students" (Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010, p. 31). Teacher leadership is characterized by several core principles: (1) "advocating what's right for students; (2) opening the classroom door and going public with teaching; (3) working 'alongside' teachers and leading collaboratively; (4) taking a stand; and (5) learning and reflecting on practice as a teacher and leader" (Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010, p. 95). Mutual trust built through collaborative activities is perceived as worthwhile with each teacher's autonomy and voice validated and affirmed.

CONCLUSION

Lieberman and Friedrich (2010) affirm teacher leaders focus on students, collaboration among teachers, and a commitment to learning. Teacher leaders are best developed as they demonstrate best practices in the big three of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, show an understanding of school cultures as they initiate and support change, and support the development of colleagues in a variety of setting (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) affirm how teacher leaders lead inside and outside of classrooms, nurturing other teachers to become leaders and influencing improved educational practice. Teacher leaders work optimally when addressing a recognized need, working directly in classrooms with teachers, focusing on student learning, and ensuring support from the principal (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Reason and Reason (2007) concur that intentionally facilitating the work of teacher leaders builds capacity to drive change in improving schools.

Achieving a school's goal of school improvement depends on rewarding, recognizing, and appreciating the work of teacher leaders and all teachers as they enhance instructional practice resulting in increased student learning. By celebrating the learning of each teacher and student and the outcome of continuous educational improvement, the self-esteem of teacher leaders is reaffirmed, and teachers' motivation to teach and lead is celebrated. Teacher leaders find meaning and satisfaction in their leadership roles because they believe they are making a difference in the learning of students and colleagues, while receiving recognition and earning professional respect for what they do and contribute (Birky, Shelton, & Headley, 2006).

Teacher leaders potentially can lead their colleagues to optimal performance levels based on a shared commitment to student learning, empowerment, relationships, and collaboration, or what Blanchard, Parisi-Carew, and Carew (2009) describe as high-performing teams. Increased morale, professional status, and work satisfaction are recognized and appreciated by school administrators, parents, and students. The qualities demonstrated by teacher leaders, such as integrity, commitment, strong communication skills, expertise, courage, discernment, focus, generosity, initiative, passion, positive attitude, problem-solving abilities, and responsibility align consistently with those identified by Maxwell (1999). Schools need and deserve teacher leaders who demonstrate these qualities.

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