

Teacher Leadership

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INTRODUCTION

For the past quarter century, the school reform movement has emphasized the importance of the role of teachers in leading (Murphy, 2005). Most recently, teacher leadership has been rooted in school improvement as a means to cope more meaningfully and successfully with change (Anderson, 2004). Within the York Region District School Board, teacher leadership is fostered and developed through the lens of literacy, as a means to implement change at the board and school level. This paper begins with a look at definitions of teacher leadership, and explores existing barriers as well as benefits. Leadership practices are then discussed that encourage and facilitate teacher leadership within the school. Finally, the York Region District School Board's Literacy Plan is examined as a framework within which to share my personal journey, from classroom teacher, to literacy lead teacher, to newly-appointed administrator.

A Look at Teacher Leadership

Teacher leadership may be either formal or informal in nature. Some of the formal leadership roles include lead teacher, master teacher, department head, union representative, member of the school's governance council, or mentor (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999). Teachers holding these types of roles are often expected to carry out a wide range of functions, which may include stimulating the professional growth of colleagues, being an advocate for teachers' work, improving the school's decision-making processes, inducting new teachers into

the school, or positively influencing the capacity of other teachers to implement change (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991, as cited in Leithwood et al., 1999). Teachers also take on leadership in informal ways, by sharing their expertise, volunteering for school projects, assisting colleagues with classroom duties, and engaging with colleagues in experimentation and examination of more powerful instructional techniques (Leithwood et al., 1999).

Research by Leithwood et al. (1999) reveals how teacher leadership is perceived by teachers. Teachers define teacher leaders most often by their values, such as being committed to one's school and community, acting in fairness, and showing concern for the morality of school decisions. The personality traits of openness, honesty, and genuineness are mentioned in association with teacher leadership, as is having good interpersonal and communication skills. Teachers perceive teacher leaders to be those teachers who perform administrative tasks, model valued practices and take on formal leadership practices. They see teacher leaders as demonstrating procedural knowledge, such as how to run a meeting, and possessing declarative knowledge about certain aspects of the profession in the areas of policy, union issues, or school and community. Teacher leaders are also seen as holding a certain expertise (Swanson, 2000, as cited in Murphy, 2003) or skill in teaching (Berry & Ginsberg, 1990, as cited in Murphy, 2003), as well as being collaborative and collegial (Murphy, 2003). Although not a comprehensive summary of everything that makes up a teacher leader, this portrait of a teacher leader is certainly one that includes personal values and traits as well as knowledge and skills. It is unclear, therefore, why teacher leaders may be hesitant to lead within a school, and what obstacles may arise to discourage their leadership.

According to Smylie & Denny (1990), the structural elements of time and access are barriers to teacher leadership, as most leadership responsibilities are assigned in addition to teachers' regular school and classroom assignments. As well, teacher leaders are not available to other teachers during the regular school day and school year, as they are busy in their classrooms, so there is little opportunity to work with colleagues and develop the relationships necessary to fulfill the role as defined by their leaders and peers. Long-standing norms of the teaching profession further challenge the prospects of teacher leadership. The norms of privacy and autonomy (York-Barr & Duke, 2004) encourage teachers to remain private and to refrain from judging or commenting on their colleagues' practice, while the norm of equality discourages teachers from disrupting the equal professional status that they all share (Smylie & Denny, 1990). A fitting metaphor for the prevailing norm of egalitarianism is that of the "crab bucket culture" portrayed by Duke (as cited in York-Barr & Duke, 2004, p.272), comparing teachers to crabs in a bucket who reach up and drag each other down during their attempts to climb out. And yet, teacher leadership has become an important element in the reform strategies from the 1980's onward (Murphy, 2005), and has benefits to the school and the students, as well as to teachers themselves.

Teacher leadership is rooted in school improvement and shared decision-making initiatives, and is associated with reform movements that call for greater professionalization, more teacher leadership, and collaboration in schools (Bascia, 1997; Lieberman, 1988; Smylie & Denny, 1990; Wasley, 1991, as cited in Anderson, 2004). The current change model recognizes teachers as full partners in leading, defining, and implementing school improvement efforts (Fessler & Ungaretti, 1994, as cited in Murphy, 2005) and builds on the energy of teacher

leaders as change agents at the school level. In fact, it is believed that school reforms have a better chance at penetrating the classroom and contributing to higher student achievement if teacher leadership can be nurtured and strengthened (Urbanski & Nickolaou, 1997, as cited in Murphy, 2005). Current demands on principals to act as visionaries and managers as well as instructional leaders can be lessened by drawing on the expertise of teacher leaders, who often remain in the school for longer periods of time than do their principals, thus holding strong cultural and institutional knowledge of the school (Danielson, 2007). Benefits also exist for the teachers themselves, as the flatness of the teaching profession, where veterans have the same responsibilities as novice teachers, often results in frustration and cynicism if a desire for greater responsibility is left unfulfilled (Danielson, 2007). In fact, “teacher leadership has become synonymous with the drive towards greater professionalism for teachers” (McCay et al., 2001, as cited in Murphy, 2005, p.43). The “transformation of teaching from an occupation to a profession” (Berry & Ginsberg, 1990, as cited in Murphy, 2005, p.43) involves teachers assuming leadership and being provided with the opportunity to influence both practice and change in schools. A look at effective ways of facilitating teacher leadership at the school level is now worth examining.

Developing Teacher Leadership within a School

Although schools need to be led by individuals, their leadership should be replicated throughout the organization in order for change to take place. When the authority to lead is dispersed within the school, in between and among people, leadership becomes a much stronger internal driver and is mutually reinforcing (Harris, 2003). A principal, who gives

authority to teachers and helps them to use it wisely, is able to use structure as a vehicle for empowering others. This approach depends heavily on mutual respect and trust, so that leadership practices are undertaken collectively, and differences or conflicts are engaged with a genuine search for meaning (Harris, 2003). Communities of teacher leaders are best created by linking professional development to leading since teachers who are engaged in learning with their peers are most likely to embrace new initiatives which lead to improvements at the school and classroom level (Harris, 2000, 2002, as cited in Harris, 2003).

This idea of collective learning is echoed by Elmore (2004) in his principles of distributed leadership. To counterbalance the teaching norms of isolated and individualistic learning, he emphasizes the need for leaders to create environments in which individual teachers and groups expect to have their ideas and practices scrutinized by their colleagues, so that learning becomes the social responsibility of every member of the system. Rather than hierarchies, which have a clearly defined division of labour, teachers operate in networks of shared knowledge and complementary skills (Elmore, 2002). With collective learning as the norm, leadership will flow from making use of differences in expertise, rather than from positions of authority and power. Elmore explains that the exercise of authority requires reciprocity of accountability: if the leader with formal authority holds others accountable for some outcome, then the leader is equally responsible for assuring that the others have the capacity to do what they are being asked (Elmore, 1997, as cited in Elmore, 2004).

The theme of reciprocity resonates in the writings of Lambert who defines leadership as “the reciprocal processes that enable participants in an educational community to construct

meanings that lead toward a shared purpose of schooling” (2003b, p.423). Lambert emphasizes that all teachers have the right, capability and responsibility to be leaders; when leadership becomes a broadly inclusive cultural concept it allows teachers to gain the sense of purpose that they brought with them when they entered the profession. Structures that facilitate leadership amongst teachers may include teams, learning communities, action research and study groups. Within these structures, meaningful conversations focussed on shared intentions, reflections, and revelations of ideas and information lead to common understandings and a deep professional focus. Coaching and mentoring of teacher leaders involves posing questions that will expand a teacher’s focus from the classroom to leading other teachers, while networking provides a broader context and learning community for the development of teacher voice and self-concept (Lambert, 2003b). Finally, support for beginning teachers contributes meaningfully to building leadership capacity in both veteran and new teachers, as the sharing of responsibility for the performance and success of a colleague is an important leadership role. Structures such as these, which develop leadership capacity among teachers, have been put into place in the York Region District School Board, as part of their school-wide approach to literacy instruction.

Literacy as a Framework for Teacher Leadership

The York Region District School Board’s [YRDSB] Literacy Policy (2006) states that every member of the learning community shall be provided with opportunities for on-going professional growth around literacy. A learning community is further defined as students, parents, school staff, trustees, Board personnel and community members who work together

to enhance student learning through a collaborative process with a focus on the Board and school plans for continuous improvement (YRDSB, 2006). Further to the Literacy Policy within the York Region District School Board is the curriculum expectations document entitled *Guidelines for Literacy* (YRDSB, 2007), which sets out a structure for long-term professional development in literacy instruction. An integral part of the structure is a strategy entitled the Literacy Collaborative, which brings school literacy leadership teams together to learn about change and how to facilitate it at the school level. It is a structure which embraces leadership teams and fosters a partnership between administrators and teacher leaders. My personal journey as a literacy leader began when I was offered a position on my school's literacy leadership team, and was allocated time within my schedule to fill the role of literacy teacher.

Prior to my induction as literacy teacher, I had taken on lead teacher roles within the school, which were supplementary to my classroom responsibilities and quite diverse in nature, ranging from managing a division of teachers in procedural matters, to leading a team in action research, to assessing a teacher candidate. Although I had benefitted from my eclectic leadership experiences, I had not experienced any kind of sustained membership in a learning community. The Literacy Collaborative sessions, held several times each year, involved me in learning side by side with administrators and other literacy teachers, and established a learning community within which I felt supported and connected. The expectation that the learning experienced by the literacy team at the board sessions would be brought back to the school resulted in on-going conversations and reflections amongst my team members as we rose to the challenge of leading our staff to a common understanding of best literacy practices. Our

school literacy team functioned as a focussed learning community as we strove to create a learning culture for the staff at large.

My position as the literacy teacher was one that was even more critical to my development as a teacher leader. As Lambert (2003b) explains, the role of mentor means an accepted responsibility for the performance and success of a colleague. Becoming a teacher of teachers was a challenging yet stimulating undertaking that caused me to reflect on my practices, as well as school-based issues, and engaged me in professional dialogue with my colleagues. The *Guidelines for Literacy* states that literacy teachers “develop skill in, and an understanding of, how to facilitate change; develop clarity and flexibility in understanding and responding to teacher needs; and support teachers on their own staff, and from other schools, in developing skill and expertise in students’ literacy learning”(YRDSB, p. ii, 2007). My leadership in this role resulted in personal growth and professional learning that further led me to apply for the position of administrator within the YRDSB, a role to which that I have recently been appointed. The knowledge and skills that I gained as a teacher leading within the framework of the York Region District School Board’s literacy strategy ensured that I was ready to create a culture of learning through literacy to support teacher leaders on my future staff.

CONCLUSION

My journey from the classroom to administration within the York Region District School Board was facilitated through a framework of literacy in which I became connected to a learning community which developed my knowledge and skills, while allowing me to share and distribute leadership. The increase in my capacity as a literacy teacher and lead learner

happened through collective practices which fostered a culture at the school in which I could share in the leadership and build capacity among other teachers. Structures such as the Literacy Collaborative in the York Region District School Board engage teachers in learning with their peers and lead them to embrace new initiatives which lead to improvements at the school and classroom level, as suggested by Harris (2003). As teachers commit to shared outcomes, they are able to influence both practice and change in their schools and become involved in assuming leadership. It is when teachers lead that schools become places where all members of the learning community benefit.

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