

Teacher Leadership: What do we know so far?

Teacher leadership has been defined as a *set of roles*, part of the discussion about *distributive leadership* and as a key part of *educational improvement efforts*. The research reveals both the strength and power of these ideas as well as the tensions and conflicts that arise in the practice of leadership.

York-Barr and Duke, (2004) in their review of two decades of research on teacher leadership discuss such questions as: What do teacher leaders do? What conditions influence teacher leadership? How are teacher leaders prepared? What are the effects of teacher leadership? Researchers write about *coordination and management*; the *professional development of colleagues*, and *participation in school improvement*. The findings consistently stress the importance and value of teacher leadership, while at the same time researchers describe some forms of tension or conflict that seems inevitable. Why is that? What do we know so far?

In Depth Studies

In 2004, Lieberman & Miller organized the research on teacher leadership into three categories which begins to tell some of the story:

- Individual teacher leader roles and organizational realities and how they bump up against the norms of schools as bureaucracies. .

- Learning in practice which includes the ways teacher leaders learn the job in different school contexts, some of which are difficult.
- Teacher leadership and reshaping school culture into professional learning communities which has its inherent tensions.

In 1991, Wasley studied three teacher leaders in-depth and found that despite different locations, focus and role, they shared some common problems. Each had difficulties working in schools organized as bureaucracies, teachers lacked incentives for assuming these new roles, and many teachers resisted being involved in reform efforts.

Smylie & Denny (1990) documented the various tensions and ambiguities that supported or constrained thirteen teacher leaders in the district they studied. This organizational perspective was to change the way researchers focused on teacher leadership .

Little (1995) introduced two important perspectives. She proposed that when teachers tried to work for improvements in the school, it was for collaboration, experimentation and flexible use of time. But in an environment that supported hierarchical control of evaluation and alignment of curriculum there was bound to be “contested ground”. This “ground” is often the place where conflict

ensues, but also where teachers learn to negotiate their position as leaders.

Learning from Practice

When Donald Schon (1983) and Atul Gawande (2002) wrote about various professions, they laid a foundation for researchers to study direct practice to better understand what professionals did in their work, how they coped and, most importantly, what they learned on the job.

In much the same way, research on professional learning communities elevated our understanding of what it would take to work for professional learning with teachers playing a leadership role. McLaughlin & Talbert (1993) introduced the idea of a *professional learning community* where teachers talk openly, discuss curriculum and pedagogy and commit themselves to collective discussion. Their research was seminal in understanding the different kinds of communities Grossman, Wineburg & Wentworth (2001) further documented the development of a professional learning community including the conflicts over different disciplines, gender and race when a Social studies and English Department tried to collaborate. Making these *fault lines* visible as teachers work to ameliorate them,

helped educators see for the first time how professional learning communities develop. Conflict and tension is inevitable, yet it can be made productive as teacher leaders learn to build professional learning communities in bureaucratic settings. Teacher leaders do this by negotiating the “contested ground” and, in part, by making conflict productive as the “fault lines” are exposed, discussed and recognized during the development of collaborative work.

What can we learn from this research? _____

This continuous work on understanding how teachers lead can help us treat these new roles like we did when we were teachers. It is about *learning* to work in different contexts, with different people who may have learned norms of individualism, rather than collaboration. It is about negotiating the tensions between a professional orientation to our work, even though most schools are run bureaucratically (Talbert, 2010). It is about learning to build supports for teacher leadership as we continue to learn the necessity of teachers working together, forming professional relationships and teaching and learning from each other. Learning to teach took us a while to feel comfortable with all the unknowns. So too is becoming a teacher leader and learning to handle a new position, a new way of working, and forming new kinds

of relationships.

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