

Teacher Leaders in a Culture of Accountability - Emergent Roles for Transformative Teacher Learning or the New Dispensable Middle Managers?

Chair: Alex Alexandrou (Freelance Academic)

Discussant: Jason Margolis (Duquesne University)

Context

With the political and public press for raising school performance – interpreted internationally as improved student achievement on select public examinations – particular significance has been attached to the role of leadership at all levels. To this end, this symposium examines teacher leadership in relation to current policy context and discourse. It will be an interactive, comparative international symposium that will examine teacher leadership and its impact on the professional learning of teachers as it is operationalized within a culture of accountability. The presentations will offer themes from the literature, a conceptual underpinning, policy discourse and case studies.

The objectives of the session are firstly to inform the discourse surrounding the relevance of teacher leaders to the professional learning of their colleagues. Secondly, to further conceptualise this construct utilising the Leadership for Learning framework. Thirdly, to widen the policy discourse in this area in terms of examining whether the rhetoric of teacher leadership matches the reality or whether teacher leadership is another form of managerial control to adhere to accountability frameworks in place at district, state and national levels. Fourthly, to examine in detail some innovative initiatives in this field through international case studies based in Europe and the USA.

Several essential questions will frame the conversation:

- *How do perceptions of the purpose of teacher leaders impact their viability?*
- *Can teacher leaders facilitate both teacher learning and teacher compliance?*
- *Can teacher leadership serve to promote both systemic accountability and systemic growth?*
- *Is it possible for teacher leaders to avoid becoming quasi-administrators in a high-stakes accountability environment? And if so, how?*

This symposium will encourage interactive dialogue on an underlying question – which is explored in much recent teacher leader research (Hilty, 2011) – is teacher leadership a “new niche” (Harris and Muijs, 2005) to enhance the quality of teaching as well as teaching profession or are these roles guises for the ‘same old story’ of controlling and monitoring the work of teaching? A discussant will encourage interaction and dialogue among paper authors (who are all leaders in the field of teacher leadership research) and audience members (who may be teacher leadership researchers, administrators, teacher leaders, and teachers). Each presenting author will speak initially for no more than 8 minutes (total: 32 minutes), followed by a discussant who will link and comment on these views for no more than 8 minutes. The second half of the symposium will invite audience members to engage presenters in dialogue via questions and comments. The discussant will steer the discussion forward with provocative questions related to the position of contemporary teacher leaders.

Single page summaries of key points, and links to full papers, will be made available in the symposium.

Papers

Learning about teachers learning to lead: Reflections on themes in the teacher leadership literature

Philip Poekert (University of Florida)

National perspective: USA

The presentation conceptualizes teacher leadership as “the means by which credible teachers exercise formal or informal influence over supervisors, colleagues, and members of the school community through collaborative relationships that improve teaching and learning practices” (Author, 2012). The purpose is to explore three themes drawn from a review of recent teacher leadership literature and to illustrate these themes using empirical evidence from a study of a teacher leadership development program in Florida. The themes are: (1) Teacher leaders have backgrounds as accomplished teachers, which demonstrates their expertise and has the potential to give them credibility under the right conditions; (2) Teacher leadership is often centered on a vision of leadership built on influence and interaction, rather than power and authority; and (3) Effective professional development leads to teacher leadership leads to effective professional development – when properly supported. The review included only empirical evidence of teacher leadership work published since York-Barr and Duke’s (2004) review. The interview study involved 29 PreK to 3rd grade teachers enrolled in a teacher leadership graduate program. Data presented will include the empirical evidence in the reviewed articles and transcripts of 29 semi-structured interviews.

Re-Professionalisation through non-positional teacher leadership

David Frost (University of Cambridge)

National perspective: Croatia, Serbia and Turkey

This paper arises from the International Teacher Leadership (ITL) initiative which explored the potential of a non-positional approach to teacher leadership for educational and social reform. The ITL approach does not rest on traditional assumptions about organisational structures and patterns of authority. The focus is on the ‘work of leadership’ (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997) or ‘leadership practice’ (Spillane, 2006) rather than on the attributes of designated leaders. The ITL methodology was a form of action research featuring structured discourse and the exchange of narratives across cultural boundaries. Local teams in each of the 14 countries (for example Croatia, Serbia and Turkey) collaborated to create programmes of support for teacher leadership. These were evaluated in action using qualitative data collection tools selected from a common toolkit. The dialogic nature of the process addressed the hazards of ‘policy borrowing’ (Philips & Ochs, 2003; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). The ITL

initiative has contributed to what we know about strategies to mobilise teachers' sense of moral purpose in order to improve professional practice in a wide variety of educational systems. It provides evidence to support a theory of non-positional teacher leadership and illuminate strategies to support it.

Developing teachers' leadership capacity for improving schools: Time for a paradigm shift

Janet C. Fairman (University of Maine), Sarah (Sally) Mackenzie (University of Maine)
National perspective: USA

Drawing on their research and professional development with teacher leaders in Maine, the author sees reasons for optimism in many examples of teachers, schools and districts that are supporting and building teacher leadership capacity. Yet, the author also highlights conditions that constrain the development of teacher leadership. The state's limited fiscal resources have produced repeated budget cuts over the past decade, reducing the number of teachers and supports to meet the challenges of accountability demands. Geographic isolation and the small size of many schools in Maine are also factors that reduce opportunities for learning new ideas and accessing professional development. Entrenched perceptions among both administrators and teachers that reflect more traditional notions of teacher leadership persist in many schools and often limit teacher leadership to a few, formal roles with limited authority and impact. Teachers often don't recognize their work as leadership, or shy away because of persistent norms of egalitarianism. The author argues that making the promise of teacher leadership a reality will require more coordinated effort at all levels, including policy change, increased resources, and support within and outside school systems. A more profound transformation must occur in practitioners' conceptions of their own and others' leadership.

Reflecting on themes in teacher leadership using principles of Leadership for Learning

- **Sue Swaffield (University of Cambridge)**
- *National perspective: England, Norway, Denmark, and Greece*
- Teacher leadership is inextricably bound with learning – at the three levels of student, teacher and organisational learning. These are core elements of the Leadership for Learning framework (MacBeath and Dempster, 2009) which is concerned with the nature of leadership and of learning, and their interrelationships. The Leadership for Learning framework was developed through a seven country international project that included Denmark, England, Greece and Norway. Examples from these four countries will illustrate the framework's five principles: a focus on learning; conditions for learning; dialogue; shared leadership; and a shared sense of accountability. These principles will be used to analyse themes from the other papers in the symposium. Thus, the potential of the Leadership for Learning framework as a robust and illuminative analytic tool (see Alexandrou and Swaffield, 2013) will be demonstrated by looking at themes in contemporary conceptions of teacher leadership.

Synopses of Papers

Learning about teachers learning to lead: Reflections on themes in the teacher leadership literature and their manifestation in a teacher leadership development program in Florida

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Objectives:

The purpose of this presentation is twofold. (1) Explore three themes drawn from a review of recent teacher leadership literature, and (2) Share empirical evidence from a study of a teacher leadership development program in Florida as illustrations of the themes and examples of transformative teacher learning.

Perspectives:

This presentation conceptualizes teacher leadership as “*the means by which credible teachers exercise formal or informal influence over supervisors, colleagues, and members of the school community through collaborative relationships that improve teaching and learning practices*” (Poekert, 2012, p. 171). The session explores these three themes below.

Methods:

The presentation draws conclusions across the literature on teacher leadership and presents original evidence from a qualitative interview study of teachers participating in a teacher leadership development program in Miami, Florida. The review included only empirical evidence of teacher leadership work published since York-Barr and Duke’s (2004) review. The interview study involved 29 PreK to 3rd grade teachers enrolled in a teacher leadership graduate program (Masters or Specialist level).

Data Sources:

Data analyzed include the empirical evidence in the reviewed articles and transcripts of 29 semi-structured interviews.

Results:

The presentation is structured around the following themes, providing discussion and illustrations.

1. Teacher leaders have backgrounds as accomplished teachers, which demonstrates their expertise and gives them credibility.

Discussion: In their 2004 review, York-Barr and Duke pointed to teachers’ classroom effectiveness as central to their credibility as leaders in the eyes of their colleagues. This was confirmed in Danielson’s (2007) discussion of the characteristics of effective teacher leaders.

Illustration: Program participants pointed to their development as master teachers and teacher researchers as important in their recognition by others as leaders. One teacher shared: “Administrators ask me to present more based on my classes – they see the changes we are doing to take initiative to improve the school as a whole” (Catherine)¹.

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

2. Teacher leadership is centered on a vision of leadership built on influence and interaction, rather than power and authority.

Discussion: Teacher leadership aligns well with conceptions of distributed leadership that describe leadership as being “stretched out” over a variety of stakeholders (Spillane et al., 2004). Such models have been connected with improvements in student performance (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010).

Illustration: Nineteen of the 30 teachers described an increase in their collaboration with their colleagues. Carrie explained that she now listens more to colleagues and offers feedback rather than attempting to do things by herself. Now she’s able to “talk with my administrators to arrive at solutions.” They ask her for advice and rely on her.

3. Effective professional development leads to teacher leadership leads to effective professional development.

Discussion: Teachers leaders facilitate school-based professional development for colleagues by leading communities of practice that examine teaching practice (e.g., Smeets & Ponte, 2009). Furthermore, teacher leaders themselves continue to learn in the enactment of teacher leadership (MacBeath & Dempster, 2008).

Illustration: Fifteen of the 30 teachers described leading some form of professional development, including providing presentations, leading teacher inquiry groups, and mentoring colleagues.

Significance:

This presentation extracts major themes on teacher leadership from a review of recent literature and adds empirical evidence to support these conclusions and illustrate these examples for the session’s audience.

References:

Danielson, C., 2007. The many faces of teacher leadership. *Educational Leadership*, 65 (1), 14–19.

Leithwood, K. & Mascall, B. (2008). Collective leadership effects on student achievement. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(4), 529-561.

Leithwood, K., Patten, S., & Jantzi, D. (2010). Testing a Conception of how school leadership influences student learning. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 46(5), 671-706.

MacBeath, J. & Dempster, N. (Eds.) (2008) *Connecting leadership and learning: Principles for practice*. London: Routledge.

Poekert, P. E. (2012). Teacher leadership and professional development: Examining links between two concepts central to school improvement. *Professional Development in Education*, 38(2), 169-188.

Smeets, K. & Ponte, P. (2009). Action research and teacher leadership. *Professional Development in Education*, 35(8), 175-193.

York-Barr, J. & Duke, K. (2004). What do we know about teacher leadership? Findings from two decades of scholarship. *Review of Education Research*, 74(3), 255-316.

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Supporting Teacher Learning and Leadership: Progress and Challenges

**Presented by Janet C. Fairman and Sarah V. Mackenzie
University of Maine, USA**

In this paper, the authors use the Leadership for Learning (LfL) framework as a lens to illuminate areas of progress and challenge in supporting teacher learning and leadership. They draw on their own research and professional work with schools and educators in the rural state of Maine, USA as well as the broader literature. The authors describe enduring challenges in two areas of the LfL model: supporting the conditions for teacher learning and developing a shared sense of accountability for the learning of all students in a school. They argue that improving the conditions of learning will require fiscal resources, political will, and better coordination at the state, local, and university levels. Specific aspects requiring more attention include: regularly scheduled time for teachers to engage in professional learning with colleagues, access to broader knowledge networks outside the school, and professional development focused on professional relationships, collaboration and leadership.

Developing shared accountability may be a greater challenge; it is less about the provision of external resources and more about changing conceptions about the professional role of teachers. The authors describe barriers including the demoralization of teachers in the context of high-stakes testing, lack of teacher control over their own learning and school change efforts, persistent norms of autonomy and egalitarianism in schools, and reluctance of teachers to identify themselves as “leaders.” The authors call for a paradigm shift in the notion of teacher and teacher leader, such that it will be an expectation and reality for all teachers to engage in collaborative learning, shared leadership and accountability in their schools. They argue that disrupting the entrenched beliefs and norms will require a coordinated effort to include new conceptions of teaching and leadership in both pre-service and in-service training for all educators, developing a strong cadre of school leaders who can foster a shared vision and accountability in their schools, and engagement with knowledge networks outside the school.

Recent initiatives at the state and national level are providing supportive structures and learning opportunities to support school improvement efforts and foster all five principles of the LfL model. Professional learning communities and communities of practice are helping educators focus on inquiry, learning, dialogue and collaboration. Content area coaches, state and national learning networks are providing additional knowledge and support to guide practice. State requirements for developing evaluation systems are engaging teachers and administrators in shared leadership. Data teams are focusing on accountability for student learning. Charter schools provide flexibility for innovative practice. While these efforts provide critical support to schools, the authors caution that resources are not available to all schools, and that some of the most underperforming schools may be less likely to get the help they need. Further, some promising state policy initiatives remain ideas on paper, and have not been implemented.

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