DEVELOPING TEACHER LEADERS FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

BY

Kenneth D. Jenkins
Professor of Educational Leadership
Reich College of Education
Appalachian State University
Boone, NC 28608
jenkinskd@appstate.edu

Sara O. Zimmerman
Professor of Curriculum and Instruction
Reich College of Education
Appalachian State University
Boone, NC 28608
zimmermnsj@appstate.edu

Doris M. Jenkins
Associate Dean
Reich College of Education
Appalachian State University
Boone, NC 28608
jenkinsdm@appstate.edu

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It is no great mystery that schools have become more complex as social institutions over the last generation. Public schools have accepted increasingly demanding challenges to uphold their responsibilities to further democratize the nation, socialize the young, and impart the knowledge and wisdom of the culture. The challenges have ranged from such mundane functions as teaching the young to drive automobiles to the more overwhelming assignment from desegregating a society to eradicating racism within that desegregated society. Schools have been asked to become nutritionists for the poor and elderly, as well as to become pipelines to a better life for all, including the wealthy. They have been asked, through the mandates of No Child Left Behind, to accept responsibility for teaching basic academic skills successfully to all children, regardless of the adverse circumstances that may befall any given child. In North Carolina and elsewhere, schools and school districts are now held responsible to ensure that required medications are administered to children with exceptional medical needs (e.g., insulin; Ritalin, etc.). The increases in ethnic diversity that the demographers predicted nearly a generation ago (Hodgkinson, 1989) are now real, and the public schools bear the responsibility for meeting the academic and social needs of the multiple cultures in our schools, often with fewer real dollars to allocate to these issues. To make matters even more complex, the nation’s public schools often are criticized for the economic shortcomings of our society and are seldom credited for facilitating economic growth and attainment.
Moreover, public schools been asked to do these things while they respond to ever increasing competition from others who claim to be able to do those same things better, cheaper, and/or faster (Barth, 2001; Hargreaves, 2002). In a little more than a decade, charter schools in the U.S. have grown from one (in Minnesota) to over 2900, serving more than 680,000 students (NCDPI, 2004.) In North Carolina, in that same time period, charter schools and their corresponding enrollments have gone from 0 to 100 schools with over 20,000 students. Home schooling has increased from about 7,000 students to well over 51,000 students in the same time period (NCDPI, 2004). The issues of school choice have added the additional burden of school marketing onto an already overcrowded schedule of opportunities to lead and learn.

The complexity is even more pervasive. At the core of managing this complexity is the school principal who is expected to manage both a multi-million dollar facility and a multi-million dollar roster of executive, professional, and clerical personnel. The principal also is expected to ensure the safety and the physical and social well-being of several hundred young people, as well as serve as an iconic educational leader in the school’s greater community. Moreover, this already beleaguered professionally trained administrator is further expected to function as a leader of instruction. General and sustainable school improvement is directly related to the quality of instructional leadership a principal performs or permits. This is and has historically been the raison d'être of school leadership. It provided the basic framework that the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) used to frame their national standards for preparation programs and which later became the basis for developing the School Leaders Licensure Examination by ECS (CCSSO, 1996; ECS, 2004). It forms the
common thread for the national standards used by NCATE to evaluate programs that prepare school administrators. It is at the heart of the professional development standards promulgated by the National Staff Development Council for designing and implementing professional learning activities. It formed one the major correlates to be derived from the effective schools research, recently updated by Lezotte (2002). Yet, instructional leadership does not absorb the proportion of a principal’s time that such an essential function should. Elmore (2002) describes it as the profession’s “Holy Grail,” while Matthews and Crow (2003) fail to even include it as one of their major conceptualizations for the principalship.

Often, principals treat the functions of instructional leadership and the functions of performance appraisal as one and the same, unlike the broader conceptualizations proposed by such authorities as Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon, Sergiovanni and Starratt, Goldhammer, Anderson and Krajewshi (1993) and others. Glickman (2004) and his colleagues present the functions of supervision principally around a framework of adult capacity building, where competency and expertise is developed, not just from hierarchical relationships, but from collegial and collaborative relationships as well. In this framework, while instructional improvement lies at the heart of the educational enterprise, the responsibility for instructional improvement is distributed to many people, including teachers. Sergiovanni and Starratt (1998) describe supervision as moral action, thereby requiring those who participate in the supervisory processes to hold a distinctly moral rather than just an instrumental perspective. Acts of professional will, in this framework, are to be surrounded by commitments to virtue, to caring, and to integrity. Goldhammer (1993) and his colleagues speak eloquently of the power of clinical
supervision, where the emphasis is on focused assistance, non-judgmental growth and high quality professional conversations. The emphasis in this framework is directed toward growth, not punishment. Peer coaching, an extremely high form of teacher leadership, has been a natural outgrowth from the clinical supervision model.

Too often, contemporary principals tend to gravitate to the outdated inspection model where the principal is the singular school authority who uses whatever time he/she spends in a classroom as a part of the evaluation rather than a growth and development process. There is very little professional “fun” in this perspective. Because most principals tend to dislike doing performance appraisals, whatever practices might happen in the name of instructional leadership fall victim to this antipathy.

Despite the increased complexity and difficulty to make instructional leadership real and important in schools, teaching and learning must move forward to meet ever increasing levels of student performance expectations. That enduring dyad of teaching and learning is still generally conceived as the core mission of public schools, and it is the one most politically obvious to policy makers and the general public. It has also become the lightening rod for the current round of criticism directed at the public schools, leading to such narrow mindsets as equating school improvement and reform with standardized testing and such broad stroke policies as the federal No Child Left Behind legislation.

To accomplish these upwardly spiraling expectations for results, principals have to get better at accomplishing this core mission while they concomitantly attend to accomplishing the myriad other responsibilities of school leadership as well. They cannot do all of it alone. They need more hands, and the hands most available to them are those
of their most skilled and knowledgeable teachers. We acknowledge that there are pilot programs in some parts of the country where school systems have hired additional personnel to handle the administrative matters of the school, thereby freeing the principal to be more attentive to issues surrounding curriculum, instruction, student learning, and accountability. As attractive as this educational version of a hospital administrator model might be, the practicability of widespread implementation is still a long time away, if ever. Yet the need for more leadership hands will continue.

For Elmore and others (Elmore, 2000; Spillane & Halverson, 1999), these concomitant needs invite the distribution of leadership throughout the organization. Blasé and Blasé (1994) clearly articulate that the principal’s most important challenge is tapping teachers’ expertise and experience to facilitate enlightened decisions and build better educational programs (p. 5). Teachers who have principals who do this “tapping” report that their principals guide rather than dictate, trust teachers’ professional judgment, listen, and encourage (p.73).

Danielson (1996) positions the teacher leadership function as one of the core professional responsibilities of professional practice. The sources of leadership to help drive school improvement must come from teachers as well. Katzenmeyer and Moeller (2001) assert that teacher efficacy is a desired consequence of teacher leadership and efficacious teachers participate in the processes of school improvement and community building.

We argue that schools can continually be transformed by developing the leadership capacities of teachers, thereby enabling leadership opportunities and responsibilities to be distributed throughout the school. This process helps build a
heightened sense of community within the school. Two of the authors offered an on-line graduate course, Teacher Leadership and School Improvement, to two separate cohorts of masters-degree level students, all of whom were classroom teachers. One of the authors is currently offering a third iteration of this same course, also in an on-line, web-assisted environment. The purpose of the course is to help these teachers learn how to exercise the innate leadership capacities that they often did not realize they had. Many of the lessons learned about developing teacher leaders for school improvement came from the interactions and the experiences of the teachers in this course as they found themselves coming face-to-face with their own narrow perspectives regarding school leadership, as well as finding their own capabilities to act and finding their voices to speak out, where before, they usually felt disempowered to do so.

**Teacher Leadership and School Improvement**

For the practices of distributing leadership to be as authentic as possible, principals have to trust the capacities of teacher leaders to handle the leadership tasks allocated to them. In effect, they have to relinquish control and allow others to assume both the authority and the guidance for innovations and improvements. Because principals can never relinquish responsibility for what others do, this is not easy for them.

However, the process of accepting and even embracing the responsibilities that accompany teacher leadership is not easy either. Teacher leaders not only have to accept the consequences of being empowered, but that they must be willing to become enabled as well. In fact, we learned from these students that teachers have to learn how to be empowered and they have to learn how to actually exercise the leadership they come to understand that they possess. Teacher leadership is not a natural outgrowth of training
and experience. In fact, we found that many teachers never fully saw themselves as leaders until the content of the course caused them to confront that reality. One newly enabled teacher leader said: “This has been the most challenging class I have had, yet it has been the most empowering class as well. I have learned SO MUCH about myself and my school. I never knew the responsibilities that teacher leaders have or how they can improve the school. In fact, I never looked at myself as a teacher leader until this class.” Another teacher made this comment: “I never considered myself a teacher leader before, just very experienced. Now, I know that I am a teacher leader and it has been evident with my coworkers, principals, and even my husband.” Epiphanies such as these became commonplace as the teacher leaders acquired more understanding and had the chance to apply their new understandings to issues and circumstances in their respective schools.

These emerging teacher leaders were further introduced to the concepts of power and their particular role in managing power relationships. Too often, we found that teachers regarded possessing power to be commensurate with position, status, and authority. They learned, however, that they have the same power that most everyone in the school had, and that they could exercise various forms of power in the cause of student achievement and school improvement. One teacher asserted: “I learned that things just don’t happen for teachers. Teachers who want to change and make changes will make changes! Also, we are very powerful, but we have to be willing to put forth the effort and use the power given us.” Another more experienced teacher came to understand expert power in this way. “Twenty-five years of teaching experience as well as being National Board certified offer a certain amount of expertise to my area of language arts. I use this ‘power’ with parents as well as with colleagues. Parents seem
more receptive during conferences when I offer my expert opinion, than when I was a younger, less-experienced teacher. They seem to be less offensive when student progress or behavior is an issue.” Still another teacher and student in this course came to realize that using one’s power can bring good things to those on the receiving end. She said, “I am the Department of Public Instruction certified writing trainer in our system. After offering initial writing training to new fourth grade teachers each year, these new teachers usually want to come to my classroom and observe a day or two in the fourth grade. I open my classroom door, my filing cabinets, and my heart to them, as I do for the new teachers I mentor at our school. I am there for them no matter how busy I am.” Power has been long regarded as the “lubricant” that enables leadership to move from abstraction to action, and these teacher leaders have come to understand that.

These teacher leaders also discovered the power of information. Part of being empowered and enabled as a teacher leader is both to have access to the information from which school improvement decisions should be made and to have the knowledge and skills to use the information in important and appropriate ways. A part of the course content required that they investigate their respective school improvement plans as well as investigate the student performance data that should have been central to school improvement planning. In many instances, teachers discovered that their school improvement plans were outdated. One teacher said: “After carefully reviewing our elementary school’s current ABC/AYP status and the history of our students’ performance since the year 2000 … in Reading and Mathematics, I discovered huge discrepancies between male and female students’ achievement and growth. These same discrepancies were consistent among the Black, Hispanic and White subgroups in our
school.” In other instances, they discovered that the data regarding their school’s performance were not generally available to teachers. They further discovered that, after this course, they knew more than many of their colleagues, a lot more in some cases. One teacher remarked: “I feel very knowledgeable about so much more now. I had no idea that I even had access to some of this information.” Another teacher found that knowing the data helped to affirm what she already suspected was the truth. She said: “I know this is a good school, but going back over specifics and talking to colleagues, I found real reasons behind the fact that we are a really good school. Now I have evidence to back up my beliefs.” However, still another teacher, when she gained access to the data, said: “When looking at our school’s report card, I was in shock of how it looks to someone looking in on our school.” Still another teacher, when she was faced with this assignment, discovered that “Our school improvement plan has not been reviewed as an entire faculty in the two years that I have worked at the school. That is, the same school improvement plan that existed prior to NCLB requirements was the one being used to address the needs revealed by NCLB data.”

As their own sense of understanding and acting as teacher leaders developed, the dynamics for exercising their leadership changed. Sometimes, waiting gave way to action. A group of these teachers established a meeting with two district-wide testing coordinators to find out more about the accountability system and how to interpret NCLB data. They discovered that the information they sought was supposed to have been provided by their principals, and in many instances, it had not been. On another occasion, a team of these teachers took the initiative to make the case for their own technology integration, and was able to acquire several thousands of dollars worth of new equipment
to implement their team’s technology plan. One teacher remarked: “I have much more respect for teacher leaders. My principal has even asked my opinion on matters. This [the course] was good for me. I needed to be more involved in my school.” Still another teacher commented: “I don’t know if I learned a lot more about the school improvement efforts at my school, but I did learn a lot about how my school works, and its strengths and weaknesses. It [the course] made me want to work harder to get parents and the community involved, and it made me feel empowered to try to make such changes.” What these teachers learned was that to get things done, leadership demanded that they move out of their comfort zones and take the chance of failing.

**Overcoming the Norms of Teacher Socialization**

We said earlier that distributing leadership was not easy. Nor is being a teacher leader in a school environment where those who “stand out” are often seen as counter-cultural to the leveling norms of teacher conduct and activity (as in “Don’t make waves.”). Too often, we found that teachers were not encouraged by their peers to rise above the general tenor of such normative conduct, lest such actions make others “look bad.” Teachers are often socialized to suppress dissonance and seek harmony. Raising objections, asking questions, or seeking alternatives are too frequently seen as time wasters to some in the school’s professional community. However, because the course made teachers look critically at the content and conduct of professional meetings in their respective schools for example, they discovered that the normative behavior they once accepted came to be seen as toxic and counter-productive. In some cases, they even “blew the whistle” on themselves. One young teacher, still in the throes of the acculturation process, remarked: “At our last faculty meeting the reading team presented
the information they had acquired from the summer reading institute. The hardest aspect of presenting this information had to be the apathetic attitude from the teachers. I feel like many, myself included, have been disrespectful during these presentations. Thus, we have missed out on information and/or strategies that could have benefited our students. Our attitudes also create an atmosphere that is not supportive of those who are trying to create a positive learning community.” Another teacher from a different cohort commented: “I was always aware that there were particular teacher leaders in our school. However, I saw them in a different light while asking for help throughout this course. Some that I idealized before were not very helpful, and I was surprised that they didn’t show more enthusiasm.” What this course helped to accomplish was to have these emerging teacher leaders look at something pretty ordinary (faculty meetings) through different lenses.

Isolation was once an accepted mode of professional conduct for these teachers. The training they received through this course drove them to become teacher leaders and made collaboration the means to solve school improvement problems. They had to seek colleague feedback on some of their lesson plans. They had to survey colleagues on issues within the school. They had to formulate a school improvement project that was aligned to some aspect of their school’s improvement plan and they had to involve colleagues and the administration in the construction of that project. Project topics embraced a wide range of possibilities, from writing proposals to secure additional technological capacities to organizing fund-raisers to provide much-needed clothing to homeless and neglected children.
The course structured 11 different on-line discussion groups where these teachers were asked to interact on teacher leadership and school improvement issues. These teacher leaders found these discussion opportunities to be among the most valuable experiences they took from the course. One teacher made the observation that “…I learned how much we are all dealing with the same issues. So often we feel like we are at sea alone. These discussions made me realize that we are all fighting the same battles. Many times, others had very insightful information to help us deal with what we are fighting for.” In short, the course taught them to break their isolation and find colleagueship. Once they found that, they discovered that the power of the several is almost always greater than the power of the individual. They came to understand that no single teacher can be the Lone Ranger and hope to effect sustainable change.

**Lessons Learned for Developing Teacher Leaders in Schools**

Out of this experience came a number of pretty significant lessons we learned about: (1) guiding teachers to embrace their opportunities as teacher leaders; (2) helping principals use their power and authority to develop more leadership capacity in their respective schools; and, (3) even some lessons for ourselves as we work to improve our own capacities to develop teacher leaders. For instance, to those teachers who might embrace the opportunity to lead, we share what we have learned.

1. **Don’t be afraid to challenge another teacher’s perspective or idea.** While every idea has the potential for merit, and every perspective holds the potential to be a preferred one, not all ideas or perspectives are equally sound or even equally sensible. We found that teachers might challenge administrative perspectives, but they had difficulty telling a colleague that an idea or perspective was not
particularly sound. In the course, we helped these teachers see ways to offer these different perspectives without being perceived as either negative or unsupportive.

2. Put yourself in position to take a stand, where necessary. Teachers are generally acculturated in their adult professional communities to seek harmony and avoid dissonance. Most teachers embrace the nurturing side of their professional work. Yet, when they encounter the need to negotiate anything with administrators, they find that these people are generally not at all shy about creating dissonance. The result is that teachers find themselves on an uneven playing field, often intimidated and almost always reacting instead of acting. We try to teach them to treat these opportunities as a way to propose solutions to problems. We advise against using these encounters as a place to voice complaints, or at least to have a solution to the complaint in hand before the meeting begins.

3. Feeling empowered and acting empowered almost always feels wonderful, like this is how professional life is supposed to be. All of that feeling is valid, but one can also learn things that may not have been known before. Ignorance is not bliss, but deep knowledge is not always the blessing we would like it to be. Sometimes, others will resent what you have that they don’t, even if they are not at all interested in doing what you’ve done to become empowered. We encourage these teacher leaders to be as inclusive as possible, and to let others decide on their levels of engagement, and not to make their decisions for them.

4. Leadership is hard work, and leading the process of change, however vital, is harder yet. The best way to navigate these often turbulent times is to realize that
acting alone is not nearly as effective as acting within a critical mass. A group of teacher leaders intent on showing the power of a particular solution can often open doors for themselves and others. A group who can coalesce around a common goal or purpose can be effective in ways that individual, heroic leaders cannot. We teach these teachers the value of “critical mass” in navigating the pathways to change, and try to use examples from the field to underscore that precept.

There are school principals who philosophically embrace these notions of empowerment and distributed leadership, but who wonder why so few teachers step forward to meet them in this arena of empowerment. Based on our learning, we offer a few ideas.

1. Many of these teachers have been in professional situations where the legitimate power of the principalship was more intimidating than the opportunity to be empowered. So much of this interrelationship is trust-driven, and teachers whose experiences eschew openly trusting principals will probably be reluctant to join in. **Principals in this environment have to take the first, sometimes second, and even occasionally the third step to bring these teacher leaders into the fold.**

2. Sometimes, principals are unsure that teachers are capable of making the complex decisions that leadership often requires one to make. **It would be enlightening for these principals to examine the lives of these teachers outside of school.** There, they will often see world-class decision makers, dealing with the complexities of managing a home environment, assuming leadership roles in their
communities and their churches, and still finding time to volunteer, take care of an ailing relative, or simply make sure their kids develop into responsible young adults. One of the best models of effective resource management can be found in the lives of single parents raising children, maintaining one or more jobs, and finding time to attend to their children’s physical, educational, social, and emotional needs. They can be trusted to do the job of helping a school stretch resources to achieve maximum benefit.

3. When a principal does develop a group of teacher leaders who can and will help him/her spread influence to improve conditions for students and teachers, one must understand that the principal may be asking these teacher leaders to function outside the norms of the school’s culture. These teacher leaders will stand out as foreground against an ordinary professional background. In some cases, their exercise of leadership will create resentment, misunderstandings, or even anger. Be prepared to guide and counsel them on how to deal with all that, and, if needed, protect them and their contributions.

Then, there was our own learning about how, in a professional school environment, academicians can contribute substantively to developing teacher leader practitioners. We found these insights for ourselves.

1. **We need to make sure we provide the knowledge base of leadership principles.** Leadership in general and educational leadership in particular is its own discipline, rich with lessons, stories, and applications. By and large, teachers are unaware of key concepts of leadership. In fact, we discovered that teachers tended not to see themselves through any kind of leadership lens. Therefore, the
power of self knowledge and opportunities to understand one’s role as a leadership role must not be overlooked. They need to be exposed to strategic principles of effective leadership, including, among other things, communicating for awareness and understanding, monitoring progress and supervising activity, the concept of culture, and the processes for accepting and granting autonomy with responsibility. The idea that leadership and power don’t just happen were revelations for many teachers. Teachers told us that before learning new concepts of leadership and looking at issues with a different perspective, that their view had been very narrow. With new knowledge and understanding, they viewed both school issues and their role regarding those issues with a more critical eye.

2. **We discovered that we needed to teach teachers where to find the information that would empower and enable them.** Often, teachers were confronted with sources of information generally known to those with positions of authority, but not to them. Access to information is a vital part of teacher leadership and school improvement. Teachers cannot be a part of problem-solving if they lack understanding of the problem itself. Teachers in general and teacher leaders in particular need to know where to find data and other information when solving problems. We found that teachers with a solid knowledge base of critical information felt more empowered to make effective contributions toward school improvement.

3. **We discovered that we needed to support and encourage teachers to find their own capacities for leadership.** Once teachers gained a greater understanding of leadership, once they shifted their own mental models to
embrace their own identity as a leader, and once they realized that they did not need to wait for permission to act, they felt enabled to apply their new found knowledge. They began to exhibit new skills of critical analysis, they reflected on past actions, they questioned more assumptions, and they planned for the future from a more secure position. We found that teachers stepped out of their comfort zone and in many cases changed roles within their school settings. This process put them in a place they may not have occupied before, and the newness made their confidence a bit more fragile. However, with their new perspectives, we came to realize that they also needed continued and sometimes increased support and encouragement, perhaps from us, but more likely from their peers and their principals. They may have felt empowered, but they continued to need a support network.

**Summary**

It is obvious, at least to the authors, that one antidote to managing the growing complexities of school is to extend the reach of the school’s legitimate leadership by engaging and empowering others with talent and abilities to take on professional responsibilities commensurate with the school’s improvement needs. Our inquiry was started because the function of teacher leaders seemed to be at least one promising pathway to extend leadership capacity in increasingly complex school organizations. However, it did not take long to understand the deep inter-connectedness between the use of teacher leaders to help deal with complexity and the framework of empowerment, where capacity to grow and flourish is both provided and encouraged. That connection led naturally to our desire to learn how principals and teachers view this practice, which
we subsumed under the broader construct of distributed leadership. What we found, contrary to a lot of common misperceptions, is that teacher leaders seek opportunities to lead and, given the chance to lead, they tend to be successful. We also found that most principals, rather than hoarding the power of the position, were willing to share with their teacher leaders, and these teachers reciprocated in kind. Schools are most likely to get more complex, not less, and the direction of these findings holds great promise for using broader conceptions of leadership to deal with these complexities.

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