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The Power of Invitation: Teacher Leaders as Agents of Change

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The Power of Invitation:

Teacher Leaders as Agents of Change

by Bill Zoellick, Molly Meserve Auclair, and Sarah L. Kirn

Abstract

Programs offered by universities and other entities outside the organizational boundaries of schools are an important source of ideas and support for educational improvement. Such organizations can focus on important needs—such as improving teaching of science—that schools perhaps cannot address on their own due to resource constraints. In such cases, teacher leaders can play key roles in bringing the knowledge and insights from external organizations into schools, sharing them with colleagues, and gaining administrative support. This kind of teacher leadership, responding to external initiatives rather than just to administrative priorities, is understudied, but programs in Maine that connect schools to universities and nonprofit organizations provide insight into the nature of such teacher leadership. We draw upon cases from two of these programs to offer suggestions to other organizations that might wish to develop programs for teacher leaders in support of educational improvement.

Much of the thinking and writing about educational change and improvement focuses on the political and administrative structures of schools. Research frequently looks at how educational policy at the federal and state levels is translated into decisions by school boards and district administrators and how those decisions, in turn, are transformed again as policies are implemented by school principals and teachers. This important, complicated process has been the focus of much study and analysis (see for example, Coburn and Woulfin 2012; Donaldson et al. 2008; Little 2003; Smylie and Denny 1990; Spillane and Hopkins 2013). This is the primary process of educational change.

In this article, we draw attention to a second approach to supporting improvement and change in schools. This process does not work down through the official channels of the school hierarchy, but instead originates outside of schools with colleges, universities, and nonprofit organizations. This secondary process can supplement the primary process. While the primary process is often focused on moving the needle with regard to core dimensions of learning such as reading and numeracy, the secondary process can provide teachers with supports related to science education, foreign language instruction, arts education, and other knowledge and competencies.

One notable characteristic of this second approach is that the outside organizations tend to focus initially on work with teachers and bring administrators in as the project develops, rather than working first through district administrators, then to building administrators, and finally to teachers. Not surprisingly, the professional development that these organizations offer is typically focused on teachers' work in classrooms and attends to matters such as strengthening teachers' knowledge of subject matter or their ability to use particular instructional techniques or tools. In this paper, we argue that in addition to helping teachers work more effectively in their classrooms, programs seeking to improve teaching and learning should help teachers develop their capacity to work with other teachers and with school administrators. In short, we argue for more explicit attention to teacher leadership.

We begin by examining the cases of a number of teachers who work in leadership roles supported by organizations outside their schools. We use these cases to create a picture of what teacher leadership looks like when it operates outside the structure of an official leadership role conferred by school administrators. We close by drawing on this picture to offer suggestions that might be useful to organizations that wish to strengthen their ability to cultivate and support teacher leaders who can, in turn, motivate and support teachers and administrators in pursuit of improved teaching and learning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Teacher leadership means different things to different people. We begin with the relatively broad definition offered by York-Barr and Duke, who define teacher leadership as

> the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement. (2004: 277–278)

Thinking of teacher leadership as influence is useful because influence can operate independently of the chain of command, moving up the hierarchy, laterally, and downwards as well as across organizational boundaries. In our inquiry into the sources of and supports for influence, we also draw upon Foucault's (1982: 791) thinking about power, which he sees as "a way in which certain actions may structure the field of other possible actions." Framed this way, power acts by making some courses of action more or less attractive and possible. A school principal is exercising power in offering a teacher a formal leadership position, but a teacher is also exercising power when she decides to help a colleague use new curriculum materials or instructional technology. In both cases, one person is changing the other person's "field of possible actions." Foucault's conception of power is useful in thinking about teacher leadership because, as the following cases illustrate, teacher leadership often consists of actions that are subtle and focused on creating opportunities, rather than actions that are dramatic or that seek to command response by others.

STUDY CONTEXT

We draw upon leadership demonstrated by teachers working in two different program contexts. One group comprises teachers who voluntarily participated in a two-year teacher leadership program offered within the Maine Physical Sciences Curriculum Partnership (MainePSP) at the University of Maine's Center for Research in STEM Education (RiSE Center). This program is described elsewhere in this issue (McKay et al., this issue).

The second group consists of teachers who have agreed to lead communities within the Gulf of Maine Research Institute's (GMRI) Regional Teacher Community (RTC) program. Each teacher leads a group of grade 5–8 science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) educators from different schools within their geographic region. The driving focus of these RTCs is to grow and strengthen a community of teachers who support one another in doing more authentic science investigations. These teacher leaders joined the RTC program with the understanding that their role as a leader would evolve over time, beginning with more support from GMRI and shifting towards greater responsibility for leading a community that would grow and be sustainable over time. The names used here are pseudonyms.

THE CASES

Anita

Anita is a mid-career middle school science and math teacher working in a small school district. Her involvement in the MainePSP led to an opportunity to assist the RiSE Center in creating a new program aimed at K–5 teachers across Maine to help them become more proficient in use of *productive talk*—an approach to managing classroom discourse focused on student thinking (Michaels, Sohmer, and O'Connor 2006). In productive talk, teachers redirect student's questions and assertions to other students, rather than to the teacher. Productive talk was new to Anita, but it fit well with her general approach to teaching. Her skill in creating a classroom environment in which students listened and responded to each other developed to the point where other teachers expressed admiration and even some astonishment.

She invited other teachers to visit and observe her class whenever they wanted, but also wanted to go beyond that to organize professional development to enable colleagues in her school to create and support productive talk among their students. In her words, she wanted "to change the culture of our school, not just the teachers. You know…change the culture of the kids."

However, Anita recognized that her principal at that time would not provide paid professional development time for such work. "They were like, 'Nope you can't use that time.' And I would have had to do it on my own time after school and get volunteers to do it." Her response was to hold off on her plans until she could see a way to proceed that seemed likely to be successful.

The arrival of a new principal created new opportunities. Anita responded by reengaging with work outside

of her classroom and taking on additional work valued by the administration, for example, working as mentor to two new teachers. She also saw the opportunity to put forth her thinking about professional development focused on use of productive talk. Her new principal supported her proposal to offer all grade 6–12 teachers across the entire district such professional development during a portion of the district's in-service program. She and a colleague from the MainePSP teacher leadership program led a three-hour workshop for approximately 40 teachers in the district.

Bonnie

Bonnie, a middle school math and science teacher, had just finished her third year of teaching when she joined the MainePSP leadership program. She was dissatisfied with her teaching. Equally important, she felt that she needed to be working more with other teachers to move ahead, but her school's culture kept her isolated.

During her first year in the leadership program, she took a leave of absence from her school to join the staff of the MainePSP. Her job involved delivering materials to and working with teachers across the state. As she met and talked with teachers, she developed something that she called a "facilitator role," where she learned that she could add value by coordinating the work of others and, just as important, that she did not need to have all the answers herself.

When she returned to her school, there was a new principal who was more supportive of collaborative work. Bonnie found that other science teachers in both the middle school and high school were struggling with students' use of claims, evidence, and reasoning (CER), so she proposed a book-study group to explore CER. She used a grant from the MainePSP to buy books and to organize a year's worth of professional development. Her new confidence that she could facilitate the work of others, even though she was just beginning to learn about CER, was essential to enabling her to take on this leadership role.

Her principal agreed that the book-study group could serve as a paid professional development option for teachers and also recognized Bonnie's role by including her leadership as a professional goal within her annual evaluation. For Bonnie, the creation of a more collaborative culture in her school was just as important as the focus on CER.

Caroline

Caroline is a veteran science teacher with experience in a variety of settings and roles. After retiring from teaching in another state, she moved to Maine and took a job as the sole science teacher for grades 6–8 in an elementary school in a small rural community. Aware of the potential for local misgivings about a teacher "from away," she initially focused on connecting with the school's other teachers rather than thinking in terms of leadership.

Over time, she saw that her participation in programs external to the local community could be useful to her community. Using a metaphor that reflects her new experiences living in a relatively isolated community, Caroline described the situation this way: "It's like, you know, we leave one outpost and I'm going into the general store and I'm bringing back valuable items that we can't create on our own."

One particular incident increased Caroline's confidence in the community's acceptance of her role as someone bringing an outsider's expertise and perspective. Her students were involved in study of ecological restoration of an area used by community residents. The students established a study site that they marked with flags and signs, but twice over a period of a week, local teenagers used the area as a party site and trashed the students' work.

So, I had asked the kids...I want everybody to just write on a piece of scrap paper how this makes you feel. Why you're angry; why you're sad. And then, I just compiled their sentences into a letter to the editor. [...] So now I'm getting people tapping me on the elbow in the grocery store and saying that was a great letter.

Experiences such as this contributed to Caroline's emerging as *the* science teacher in the community. She accepted that role and the implicit responsibility to speak for science education that came with it. Using a small grant from the MainePSP, she offered a series of five workshops for teachers at the K–5 level to introduce them to the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) for those grade levels.

Well, darned if every single K–5 teacher didn't show up. And so did the reading specialist at K–2 and 3–5 and so did the math specialist. I had almost 20 people, and it's a little school. I'm talking like every single staff member. And they continue to come.

Caroline's freedom to innovate in her school was partially due to her filling a void. Before her arrival, the school had not had a teacher trained and committed to teaching science. But she recognized that it was also due to the support of her principal. In the second year of our conversations, Caroline received an award for her teaching. She said, "When I got the award, I said to the principal…he congratulated me…and I said to him in return, 'Thank you for building an environment that I can be me in.'"

In interviews with Caroline over a period of three years, we saw that her work focused on objectives at multiple levels, ranging from near-term improvements in instruction to broader concerns about the future of students living in a rural community.

> *The kids that I teach, male and female, humor me and have fun with learning. But, they're sure that they can graduate from high school and earn far more money being fishermen than going to college. And I'm not saying that they shouldn't be fishermen. I'm just saying that they should see that there are other avenues. I can't do that unless I can get them [out of the community] either physically or mentally. So me being part of a larger network is really valuable.…I'm just trying to broaden their scope of understanding.*

Debra

Debra is a fifth grade teacher at a small rural school and leads GMRI's pilot RTC. She has 10 years of teaching experience, is an active member of her community outside school, and a leader in her district. Concurrent with stepping into her role as teacher leader for her RTC, she was awarded GMRI's annual award for innovative teaching. At her district, she was tapped to contribute to science curriculum design. All these points of encouragement not only opened up possibilities, but also invigorated her motivation to reach across districts and continue her practice and growth as a leader.

The community Debra leads covers two large counties in Maine; the teachers involved work with grades 5–8, teach various STEM subjects, and have different levels of comfort and experience with science. Over the two years this community has been running, Debra's role has evolved into one where she, rather than the supporting external organization (GMRI), is seen as the primary contact.

As new RTCs have formed in other areas around the state, Debra's model of leadership has informed the way they run. When asked by another GMRI RTC teacher leader what she had done to build the community's confidence in her leadership, Debra said she "made herself vulnerable" to her group by making it clear that she is not an expert and is a learner like them. This vulnerability involves more than just saying that she does not know all the answers: Debra uses her own successes, challenges, interests, and questions as a teacher as the starting point for reflection on practice by her RTC, creating a space for sharing and group learning that is generative, innovative, and fun. Like Bonnie, Debra's strength as a leader is focused more on her knowledge of how to work with other teachers rather than on knowledge of subject matter. Both Debra and Bonnie also have strong subject knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, but the distinctive characteristic of their leadership is their skill in supporting learning and pedagogical risk taking in other teachers.

Erin

Before Erin was asked to lead her RTC, she had worked for a number of years with GMRI, collaborating on curriculum development and supporting introductory institutes focused on engaging students as citizen scientists in GMRI's Vital Signs program. Erin was a key source of inspiration for the model of GMRI's RTC program. Through her experience with various professional development models and in doing authentic science, Erin felt that learning together with her colleagues had the most impact. She did not think that having a prescribed curriculum structure would change classroom instruction. When asked why she was excited to be a part of a regional teacher community Erin said,

> *I believe a strong regional group will help build a case to administrations and other teachers that cookie-cutter science labs cannot be the cornerstone of our instruction. The country needs scientists, and we, as teachers, have a captive audience of very capable scientists. We can support each other in forming collaboratives and getting over the hurdles we all will face (from classroom management techniques to reluctant curriculum coordinators).*

She has said many times that she misses having a team of science teachers to bounce ideas around with—something many rural teachers echo. Not only has this community been a way for her to connect with other teachers in her field, but her intellect, insight, experience, and drive inspire her fellow RTC members to try new things and deepen their science investigations. Erin

chose to champion the online forum that connects this community in between formal meetings and has succeeded in increasing use of the forum. Fellow teachers have visited her classroom, emailed back and forth with questions; they see her as a leader and as a collaborator. She so badly wanted a professional community to engage that when the opportunity presented itself, she embraced it.

DISCUSSION

There are a number of features that emerge from looking across these cases.

- In each case, the teacher depended on support from the school principal and others in the administrative hierarchy. Two of the cases demonstrate that if such support is missing, some teacher leaders will wait for a change in administration rather than acting without support.
- In none of these cases did the innovation or improvement begin with the school administrators. It was the teacher, working in collaboration with an organization outside the school district, who decided to work toward improvements in the school or region.
- These teacher leaders took on their leadership roles in conjunction with a focus on larger goals. The larger goals involved matters such as changing the culture of students in a school, stimulating growth of a more collaborative culture in a school, stimulating a regional shift away from cookie-cutter science labs, and creating structures to make rural students aware of a broader range of opportunities. Although these goals were consistent with the objectives of the RiSE Center and GMRI programs, they were also different, reaching beyond immediate programmatic objectives to reflect the deeper concerns and beliefs of the individual teacher leaders.
- From the standpoint of the RiSE Center and GMRI, the investment in each of these teachers resulted in more than improvement in the teacher's own classroom. By supporting development of teacher leadership within each of these individuals, the RiSE Center, GMRI, and these teachers achieved impact within entire schools and in some cases across multiple schools.

In reflecting on these cases and on our experience with other teachers in these programs and others, we suggest that that there are four important elements that organizations outside the schools should focus on if they seek to develop teacher leadership capacity to support instructional improvement: (1) leadership identity and legitimacy, (2) leadership development opportunities, (3) a supportive community of practice, and (4) reflection on leadership as a practice.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY AND LEGITIMACY

Successful leadership depends on legitimacy in the eyes of the influenced. In Foucault's (1982) framing of power relationships, power and the ability to influence others depend on differentiation. In highly hierarchical settings such as the military, differentiation is conferred in terms of rank and signified through titles, special insignia, and other means. School systems often use similar means to establish and reinforce differentiation, conferring special titles, the authority to make decisions and judgments, reserved parking spots, and other systems that distinguish intended leaders from intended followers. However, as is amply evidenced in research on teacher leadership (see for example, Donaldson et al. 2008; Little 1988), administratively assigned teacher leadership positions do not automatically translate into legitimacy in the eyes of other teachers, where the professional culture has strong traditions of teacher autonomy, egalitarian relationships among colleagues, and a tradition of legitimacy earned through seniority.

Outside organizations that might wish to recruit the teachers who come from within this same culture often have to convince teachers that there is a rationale that supports their taking on a leadership role. Both the RiSE Center and GMRI have found that offering an invitation to lead is a powerful first step in that process: the confidence that the RiSE Center, GMRI, or some other organization expresses in the teacher's potential as a leader can help in answering the important questions of "Why me?" and "What can I do?" This counters the concern expressed by some potential teacher leaders that they are just a teacher, not a leader.

Once prospective teacher leaders give themselves permission to think about taking on leadership roles, it is important to help them develop conceptions of leadership that are consistent with their personalities and

strengths. Professional development focused on leadership identity can be helpful towards this end. For example, the RiSE Center helped teachers realize that there is not just one approach to leading by engaging them in an icebreaker activity that involved choosing a quadrant, marked out on the floor, to stand in. One side of the two-by-two square distinguished between people who are more comfortable asking other people to do things and those who prefer to tell others what to do. The other dimension distinguished between those who focus on getting tasks done and those who are more interested in people. After the teachers sorted themselves in quadrants, they talked about the strengths and weaknesses of their preferred approach to collaboration. This was followed by a discussion about the kinds of leadership that could be associated with each quadrant and a broader conversation about each participant's own conceptions of leadership. The goal of this activity and others like it was to break down overly narrow conceptions of leadership that might constrain the teachers' sense of leadership possibilities.

Beyond the important work of helping teachers learn to conceive of themselves as leaders, there is, of course, the matter of establishing legitimacy as a leader with other teachers. This is where Foucault's observation about the importance of differentiation comes into play. The cases we present here suggest that the particulars of differentiation are personal and vary greatly from teacher to teacher, but generally involve recognizing and then projecting a competence that, when shared, can modify "the field of possible actions" for other teachers. For Anita, that competence involved use of productive talk. For Bonnie, it was the ability to facilitate learning in groups of colleagues. In Caroline's and Erin's cases, it grew out of subject matter knowledge and pedagogical expertise. In Debra's case, it was the ability to use her own teaching experiences, both the successful ones and the others, as the basis for reflection and inquiry among colleagues. Organizations seeking to help teachers develop their leadership skills need to help them find their special skill, style of leadership, and basis for differentiation. To do that, the organizations must provide opportunities to practice leadership.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

People learn to lead by leading. Both the RiSE Center and GMRI provided opportunities for new teacher leaders to take on leadership roles where the risk (and cost) of failure is manageable. The RiSE Center did this by engaging teachers in leadership roles within the MainePSP itself, leading task forces, project workshops, collaborations with faculty, and other activities. In these settings, program staff could fill in if the new teacher leaders ran into difficulty, and if something did go wrong, the effects would be contained within the MainePSP program rather than affecting teachers and administrators in the teacher's home school. It was only after the teachers had opportunities to practice leadership in a relatively safe space that the RiSE Center asked teachers to propose and implement leadership work back in their own schools. Similarly, GMRI staff provide significant support for teachers as they begin leading RTCs, which like the MainePSP, is a structure that exists outside of school and therefore poses a lower professional risk. RTC leaders begin by codesigning their community meetings and agendas in collaboration with GMRI education staff. Once RTC leaders have developed confidence and momentum, they will begin leading independently, planning and running gatherings, and setting the learning agenda for and with their community of teachers.

> Leadership is difficult work. Followers are free to not follow.

SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY

Leadership is difficult work. Followers are free to not follow. Bringing teacher leaders together as a community helps them work through the almost inevitable crises of confidence inherent in learning new skills and unlocks the opportunity to learn from each other's experiences. Both the RiSE Center and GMRI's RTC program provide supportive communities in which teachers can practice and develop as leaders. The RiSE Center uses a cohort structure to ensure that teachers can work with others at the same stage of development, while leaving open the opportunity for meetings across cohorts so that less experienced leaders can learn from those with more experience. GMRI's RTC program

creates opportunities for the teacher leaders of different RTCs to meet and share ideas of how to expand their roles as leaders in their individual RTCs.

Observation of teacher leaders working with the RiSE Center over a number of years suggests that providing teacher leaders with a support community can sometimes serve an additional, important purpose. As already noted, opportunities for teacher leaders to work effectively in their schools depend on the presence of a supportive administration. Turnover at the administrative level is frequent in many schools. If a supportive administrator is replaced by an unsupportive one, opportunities for the kind of leadership described here diminish. As a colleague who spent years working on a statewide improvement initiative put it, one could almost see the lights blink out in a school when an unsupportive administrator took over. Support communities outside the school provide a place that helps keep the light burning. When the unsupportive administrator moves on, this support of the teacher leader during the interim gives the school a way to relight the change process.

REFLECTION ON LEADERSHIP AS A PRACTICE

Although leadership is learned by doing, learning only by doing is slow work that does not take advantage of what researchers and practitioners understand about the practice of leadership. It is not enough for teacher leaders just to talk about the difficulties associated with a particular workshop they are leading or difficulties with teachers' misconceptions. They also need to reflect on the practice of leadership itself, so they have the opportunity to increase their own capacity as leadership practitioners.

Both the RiSE Center and GMRI support this kind of reflection by employing staff members who facilitate meetings and ensure that the teacher leaders are thinking in broader terms about leadership. In addition, the RiSE Center has involved teacher leaders in training in particular leadership skills, such as working productively with colleagues and superiors in settings where tensions and emotions can run high because the stakes are high and where there are potential differences in viewpoint on facts and objectives. The idea is that these leaders will be most effective in leading toward desired changes when they can work productively with others who may have different perspectives and concerns. GMRI's RTC program practice of bringing teacher leaders together is

designed to support similar reflection on leadership among regional leaders who may vary in style and desired outcomes of their leadership.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Several purposes motivated our writing this paper. One was simply to remind people working in and with schools that leadership by teachers who are working under the direction of school administrators toward objectives set by administrators is not the only kind of teacher leadership. Administratively directed teacher leadership will often be the primary means by which teachers support improvement, but teacher leadership supported from outside the school can play a complementary role. School administrators can benefit by recognizing and building upon this second source of leadership in support of change; a few of the cases presented here are evidence that some administrators recognize and act on that opportunity.

A second purpose was to contribute to understanding of how teacher leadership works. This paper documents some of the means by which this group of teacher leaders has established effective leadership roles and developed support from administrators and takes initial steps toward providing a theoretical framework to support such inquiry. There is much more work that can be done to develop a more complete understanding of how this kind of teacher leadership works and how to support its development.

The third purpose, which we see as the primary goal of this paper, is to encourage organizations that seek to improve teaching and learning within schools to consider teacher leadership development as a key element within their professional development programs. Many such organizations provide professional development in support of improved subject matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, use of technology, and other improvements focused on the classroom. Many of these organizations also understand that a theory of change that depends on working directly with each teacher is not scalable. Our conversations with colleagues suggest that there is at least an implicit, and sometimes an explicit, assumption that if they help one teacher in a school develop new competence or ways of engaging students, the improvement will spread to others in the school.

Our experience is that this kind of diffusion of innovation can happen, but it is rare and it takes a lot of

work on the part of the individual teacher. This paper outlines some the reasons why this is so: teacher leadership in support of change is hard work that requires support and recognition that teacher leadership is a practice in itself. It is our hope that this paper will encourage other organizations that offer professional development for teachers to consider the practice of leadership as another important part of teacher development. Further, we hope that the ideas offered here about key supports for teacher leaders will be useful as other organizations design their own teacher leadership development programs. ✍

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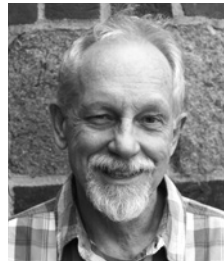
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