



# Bank Street Occasional Paper Series

Occasional  
Paper  
Series

---

Volume 2009  
Number 23 *Teacher Leaders: Transforming  
Schools from the Inside*

Article 1


---

September 2009

## Introduction: Teacher Leaders - Transforming Schools From the Inside

Gil Schmerler  
*Bank Street College of Education*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series>

 Part of the [Educational Administration and Supervision Commons](#), [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Schmerler, G. (2009). Introduction: Teacher Leaders - Transforming Schools From the Inside. *Occasional Paper Series, 2009 (23)*. Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2009/iss23/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Educate. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Paper Series by an authorized editor of Educate. For more information, please contact [kfreda@bankstreet.edu](mailto:kfreda@bankstreet.edu).

**educate**

## INTRODUCTION

**gil schmerler**

Let's say it right off: teacher leadership is *hard*. Many of the reasons are obvious: Teaching is a highly labor-intensive profession to begin with, leaving little downtime for work with other adults. School schedules are notoriously stingy with space for adult collaboration. Teachers are rarely paid to exercise leadership; when they are, they are never paid enough. There is a fundamentally egalitarian ethos in the teaching profession. Those who would step forward to offer advice to their peers, or promote innovative ideas, or speak up on behalf of their colleagues are, as often as not, regarded with suspicion or resentment. Unions, ironically, with their historic concern for clear delineation between supervisors and supervised, do not on balance do as much as one would hope to promote teacher leadership.

Teacher leaders commonly report feeling trapped in the “middle space” (Lieberman & Miller, 2004, p. 84) between the teachers whom they attempt to influence and represent and the administrators who count on them to do work that the administrators are, for various reasons, unable to do themselves—while being trusted fully by neither.

Teacher leadership may be especially challenging today, when so many of the urgent “reforms” being visited upon schools come with mandates that do not emphasize or reward—or, sometimes, even tolerate—teachers’ exercise of initiative and autonomy, let alone leadership. The editors of the most recent *Occasional Paper* remark:

Teachers are increasingly told that the measure of professionalism is not the development of their own expertise and responsiveness to the individual children in front of them. Rather, it is bought through their fidelity to uniform, commercial and heavily scripted curricula that promise (but often fail to deliver) greater student success (Boldt, Salvio, & Taubman, 2009, p. 4).

The extraordinary dominance of externally imposed accountability and standardization in this decade, defined in huge measure by test results and buttressed by tight bureaucratic and administrative regulation, is designed to leave little, if any, room for leadership from within the ranks.

*For all these reasons, teacher leadership has never been more crucial.*

A glance at the emergent literature on “teacher leadership”—or at least the

number of titles with that phrase included in the lists of Amazon and Barnes and Noble, for example—may give a false sense of linear progress. The strong movement for the professionalism of teaching in the 1990s and early years of this decade produced a long overdue awareness of the integral role that teacher leadership must play in any true reform of the schools. Wasley (1991), Barth (1990), Bolman and Deal (1994), Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001), Lieberman and Miller (2004), and Danielson (2006), among many others, have weighed in with books on the topic and identified the instructional leadership of teachers as being at least as important as that of strong principals. But the rapid emergence of the testing culture has overwhelmed such considerations, at least for the moment, and the best thinkers have turned to other, more immediate and urgent battles. The even more recent economic downturn has taken an evident toll as well. The number of teacher leadership positions in schools and districts, which had increased impressively in the past two decades, has now begun a noticeable decline as funding has dried up.

This volume is a modest attempt to restore the issue of teacher leadership to the prominence it deserves and requires.

What *is* teacher leadership, anyway? The definition problem has complicated some of the organizational thinking on the topic, and even confounded some prospective contributors to this volume. Is “teacher leadership” actually a truism? (After all, *all* teachers are leaders within their own classrooms.) Is it an oxymoron? (Teachers teach, leaders lead.) Is it a specific, designated role? Or is it a hard-to-get-your-hands-around abstraction, visible only in its subtle impact on school culture? Is it, in fact, even a useful construct, something that can help us make sense of the way schools either change to accommodate the needs of their students or remain stuck in old, corrosive patterns of failure?

Teacher leadership, as we use the term in this volume, has been, and in some places still is, all of these. The writers in these pages do not spend a great deal of time torturing the nuances of the definition, preferring to explore instead the vast variety of things teacher leaders do to make a difference in their schools; the daunting challenges of fulfilling roles in which you’re neither, entirely, a teacher nor a leader; and the ways that schools can take advantage of this powerful—and yet frequently untapped—source of vitality and renewal.

Teacher leadership has, to most proponents of progressive, democratic education, an appealing historical ring to it. It defies, in some measure, the notion of schools as hierarchies. It implies that everyone who works within a school organization has some responsibility for the welfare of the community as a whole. It

broadens the meaning of what it is to teach. It suggests a commitment to change for the better; progress in the interest of more roundly educated students; and, ultimately, a better society. “Teachers [need] to assert themselves more directly about educational affairs... in both the internal conduct of the schools by introducing a greater amount of teacher responsibility in administration, and outside in relation to the public and the community” (Dewey, 1933, p.390). To more recent researchers and theorists, it presents a dynamic antidote to the isolation of teachers in their classrooms, unable to take advantage of the rich opportunities for better practice that collaboration offers, and to the “flatness” of the teaching profession, which so often leaves teachers with a vista only of recurring waves of their own students, year after year.

To be clear, teacher leadership comes in many distinct variations, and teacher leaders come in many shapes and sizes. There remain the traditional teacher leaders of yore: the department chairs, the staff developers, the head teachers, and the union officers. There is a newer wave of instructional and learning and support specialists and coaches and coordinators—and even specifically titled “teacher leaders.” But of even greater significance for our purposes here are the unofficial—and often unacknowledged—acts of teachers who support and extend each other’s practice in a million quiet ways; who press for the greater care of English language learners or dyslexic or bullied or simply invisible students; or who advocate on committees or in principals’ offices or in the hallways for fair treatment of their colleagues or overdue instructional reforms. These are the people, struggling to create cultures where these acts are the norm, about whom the authors write so poignantly in the following pages.

Although there is considerable overlap among the essays, we have organized them loosely into three categories: *mentoring*, to address the essential question of teacher helping teacher; *transforming school culture*, to reflect some of the many ways teachers make a difference in the environment immediately beyond their classrooms; and *advocating* for change, to spotlight the voices teacher leaders find ways to project in the interest of creating broader and more enduring change.

## **Mentoring**

Any teacher knows that, no matter what the formal arrangements for supervision and evaluation, it is the guidance and modeling of colleagues that most often make the difference in what you do in your classroom. Teachers may have coaches or mentors officially assigned to them, but as often as not, they will

gravitate to a fellow teacher of their own choice for the most immediate and important instructional help. Jill Stacy and Nayantara Mhatre, in the compelling piece that opens this volume, describe a spontaneous relationship that has equal measures of mentoring, peer coaching, and teaming. Their getting together is not an event that screams “leadership” in any conventional form. But in its emphasis on careful self-study and co-planning—and on the ultimately democratic mutuality of their partnership—it offers a model of the kind of internally generated support and motivation that even the most effective leaders are often unable to inspire or create.

Kami Patrizio reminds us simultaneously of two very different things: 1) Most mentoring arrangements in schools are not so casually and comfortably effectuated as that of Stacy and Mhatre. To make them more than isolated events, they require careful structuring, thorough preparation, and continual monitoring. 2) On the other hand, there is a distinct strain of human sensitivity (call it, maybe, *poetry*) that is at the heart of any truly effective mentoring relationship. And this requires of prospective mentors not only pedagogy, but also a deep, hard look into themselves to confront the elusive issues of identity, empathy, morality, and emotion.

### **Transforming School Culture**

That changing schools is long, hard, and usually painful work has become starkly evident at this moment in history. It is probably understandable that our society has turned with a vengeance to some of the simpler remedies: set high, specific standards; test inveterately for compliance; and punish inadequate results. Or tear the existing structures down, replace them with new, smaller schools, and insist that these tender sprouts quickly achieve the results the old schools couldn't. But the approach with potentially the greatest long-term impact is ultimately the most difficult: it is the work of transforming schools into collaborative, collegial cultures, where the engagement and leadership of teachers is natural and persistent (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996, pp. 44-52).

Jessica Endlich brings us into intimate contact with the faculty of a small urban high school which depends heavily on voluntary teacher leadership, and finds itself straining against the limits of capacity. Her candid interviews show vividly the tensions that exist when there is never enough time, support, appreciation, and equity to turn a wonderful idea into reality. She suggests some baseline, common-sense strategies to enable teachers to lead without sacrificing their students or their own personal lives.

While the theme of almost all the authors in this volume is that collaboration will necessarily be at the heart of any lasting changes, it is also evident that one person can motivate specific innovations or reforms and thus make a real difference. Jennifer Groves writes movingly of the need for schools to be true learning communities and to create collective ways for teachers to share and generate knowledge. She found Sarason's (1996) call for risk taking and initiative compelling, and stepped forward to bring teachers together. It was her idea and organization of a professional development book club that brought the teachers in her school away from their regular routine, created a "rich network of learning," and offered hope and a sense of renewal to a number of her colleagues.

Kathy Rockwood's graduate students are pragmatic and idealistic all at once, and present a dramatically varied picture of how schools go about involving their teachers in leadership. As they tell their stories through a threaded internet conversation, it becomes evident that the trust, communication, transparency, and support that make distributed leadership workable and satisfying in some places is so visibly and painfully lacking in others. Not surprisingly, it is the former schools that, for the most part, produce the most fulfilled teachers and successful students.

### **Advocating for Change**

Clara Lin tells the inspiring tale of a new teacher who refused to accept the dreary status quo to which beginning professionals are so often consigned. Almost in anger at the assumption that she was supposed to be miserable for her whole first year, she struggled mightily to find innovative ways to solve her most intractable classroom problems, and then turned her energies to whole-school reform. The morass of school and community politics in which she quickly found herself turned out to be a vehicle of powerful learning for Lin, as well as the basis for a major school change. Her discovery that "'novice teaching' and 'teacher leadership' are not mutually exclusive terms" is a happy one.

Children are at the heart of most teacher leaders' struggles. But none, it would seem from Lillian Hernandez and Cristian Solorza's essay, can surpass the passion and intensity inspired by English Language Learners and other bilingual and immigrant students in their teachers, who so often and so completely identify with the daily struggles and obstacles these students face in school. For these teachers, leadership feels less like an option than an imperative. They sense the societal forces so starkly arrayed against non-English speaking children and feel they have no choice but to step forward and speak up. Bank Street's BETLA program has

prepared teacher leaders with the voice and resources to advocate for the voiceless.

Finally, Robin Hummel makes an emphatic, persuasive plea for teachers to seize the reins of instructional leadership and to take responsibility—even in the face of recalcitrant administrators and increasingly prescriptive curricula—for their own professional learning and growth. She makes the case for action research as a particularly potent professional development tool, and shows how it serves in addition to liberate teachers from inertia and dependency. Her own research indicates that teacher leadership not only benefits the field in important ways but, in fact, satisfies an urgent personal/professional need in many teachers.

These voices, many of them publishing for the first time, make an eloquent case for more attention—scholarly, public, human—to be paid to these critically important, too-often neglected people in the middle.