AWAKENING TEACHER LEADERS: A NEW PARADIGM IN EDUCATION FOR SCHOOL AND STUDENT SUCCESS

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Abstract

For decades, teachers have fulfilled many leadership roles from serving on committees to functioning as department chairs and grade-level leaders in selecting instructional materials and designing curricula. Advocacy for expanded leadership opportunities has become increasingly important in the United States. In response, state policy-makers have established advanced degrees to promote teacher leadership. Research has further shown that when teachers function in leadership roles, the results are positive for school reform, student achievement, and the profession. Because teachers are on the frontline and interact daily with students, teacher leadership is grounded by a set of principles that acknowledges teachers are positioned to make informed decisions and promote needed changes concerning the improvement of the teaching and learning process. While teacher leadership is often viewed as a set of knowledge and skills that enhance the teaching profession, the writer believes teacher leadership is an optimal strategy for school and student success. Teacher leadership is a win-win strategy for public education in states that have endorsed the teacher leadership principle. This contribution aims to bring awareness to teacher leadership. Based on a university advanced degree course the writer

has developed, the paper provides a research-based framework for promoting teachers as leaders and ultimately leading to school improvement and student success.

Keywords

Teacher Leadership, Teacher Autonomy, Teacher Advancement, School Improvement

1. Introduction

From the moment a teacher walks into a classroom, he or she is a leader. By virtue of the fact that teachers manage their classrooms, instruction, assessment, and make moment-to-moment decisions for the betterment of their students, they serve in the role as a teacher leader. However, the role of leadership in public education in the United States (US) for more than 100 years has traditionally been the superintendent of the school system, followed by each school's principal (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). School leadership has long been a top-down organization; a hierarchical structure and one held by a seldom few (Kilinc, 2014). In fact, one seminal study (Livingston, 1992) concluded that teachers as leaders only served to represent the principal's vision and had little authority to make any decisions on real changes needed within the school. However, a series of federal reform mandates to improve public education in the US set in motion a realization and a need for teachers to assume greater leadership.

For the last two decades, one far-reaching federal mandate that reshaped the educational landscape in the US was the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The law was enacted as a means to reform failing schools by closing the achievement gap between high performing and struggling students. In other words, no child would be left behind and all students would be taught by highly qualified teachers and have equal educational opportunities. To ensure compliance with NCLB (2002), each state created a standardized assessment that was administered to all students once a year and schools were held accountable to increase student achievement as determined by proficiency targets known as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) (Dee & Jacob, 2011). As a result, the epoch of accountability was thrust on US public education; schools that increased student achievement and met AYP were rewarded and schools that failed to do so were severely sanctioned (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). Such sanctions meant that principals were removed and schools were closed due to poor state-mandated test results (Goertz & Duffy, 2003).

In 2015, NCLB (2002) was reauthorized as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and while states are still required to administer state-authored standardized assessments, ESSA allows states to develop accountability measures and improvement plans to turn around failing schools. However, accountability measures under ESSA (2015) not only include student achievement but teacher and leadership effectiveness as well. Because of this federal mandate, the role of the principal has become more scrutinized due to the intense focus to meet the lofty achievement goals first established by NCLB (2002) and continued with ESSA (2015). Subsequently, NCLB (2002) and ESSA (2015) ushered in a paradigm shift for the role of the principal as the chief instructional leader.

2. Research Issue

2.1 The Changing Role of Principal

Tasked with the responsibility to determine a school's success, principals were required to set forth procedures for improving instruction and ultimately student outcomes based on the state's assessment data (Rallis & MacMullen, 2000). In other words, the role of the principal developed into the chief instructional leader – the chief architect for school improvement (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012). Subsequently, principals were encouraged to broaden their vision of leadership and as Finnigan and Stewart (2009) explicated, a seed was germinated for shared leadership to evolve. In short, leadership began to gradually shift from the longstanding top-down model of leadership to a more democratic model – a model where leadership is distributed among all team members. To this end, distributed leadership has grown in popularity because distributive leadership is about leadership practice. It is a practice that involves collaboration, promotes professionalism, teacher autonomy, and acknowledges many within the school context (Bogler, 2001; Spillane, 2006).

2.2 Emergence of Teacher Leadership

The concept of teacher leadership can be traced to the early 20th century. The foremost pragmatist, John Dewey, advocated the concept of a collaborative leadership practice be advanced within schools to effectively educate all students (1902). However, it is not surprising that due to the plethora of reform changes catapulted by NCLB (2002), the actual term teacher leadership did not begin to mobilize until the late 20th century. A preponderance of research has described the formation of teacher leadership as evolving in a series of waves (Pounder, 2006;

Silva, Gimbert, & Nolan, 2000). Subsequently, the first wave of teacher leadership to emerge was determined by the school principal; an organizational arrangement that often included teachers as leaders, such as the head of a department or grade level. Teachers were dependent on principals to award official titles of leadership (Pounder, 2006; Silva, et al., 2000). The second wave focused on teacher leadership as instructional leaders. The second wave of teacher leadership was still closely associated to the school's organization and teachers as leaders were only given the authority to make informed instructional decisions at the discretion of the school's principal (Pounder, 2006; Silva et al. 2000). The third wave of teacher leadership began to recognize teachers as professionals. It was a process of teacher advancement (Ponder, 2006). This wave corresponded to the emerging transformational change in leadership. For the first time, teachers were empowered to make decisions independent of leadership (Frost & Harris, 2003) and take the initiative to lead by mentoring new teachers, constructing professional development workshops, and engaging collaboratively to improve instruction and student learning (Lambert, 2006). As a result of the third wave of teacher leadership, Pounder (2006) has described a fourth wave that is representative of the expanded role of teacher leadership whereby teachers have the freedom to lead – to lead within the school and beyond the school's walls. The fourth wave seeks to promote teacher advancement and is still evolving today (Curtis, 2013).

2.3 The Concept of Teacher Leadership

While it is understood that the term teacher leadership is still a work in progress, the writer agrees with the following premise that teacher leadership "is a powerful strategy to promote effective, collaborative teaching practices in schools that lead to increased student achievement, improved decision making at the school and district level, and create a dynamic teaching profession for the 21st century" (Teacher Leadership Exploratory Commission [TLEC], 2008, p. 3). From this perspective, the writer recognizes that teacher leadership is more than a set of skills to be a leader. The writer endorses the concept that teacher leadership is about improving schools; it is about designing curricula and instruction to leverage equity and educational opportunity for all students, and it is about empowering teachers to become autonomous and "take the lead."

3 ESED 8131 Teacher Leadership

Research has shown a positive correlation between transformational leadership support and teacher autonomy (Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006). Additionally, research has shown that teacher leadership has had a significant impact on improving student success, the profession, and a school's culture (Danielson, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). Because of the significance, the advancement of teacher leadership has been endorsed by multiple states in the US. Today, state teacher licensing organizations have mobilized by offering graduate certification in teacher leadership for course completion beyond initial teacher certification, as well as advanced degrees. In response, ***ESED 8131 Teacher Leadership*** is an advanced graduate course the writer developed to elevate teacher leadership. It is a course that instructs, facilitates, and assesses graduate students' construction of an action plan that focuses on a proposed initiative to improve a school's effectiveness by addressing a documentable need of the school. Specifically, the course requires students to identify a problem at their school site, document the need for the proposed initiative from data analysis, describe the school context associated with teacher leadership, design specific strategies to address the problem, and identify the outcomes and criteria to assess them. Subsequently, the proposed project incorporates teacher leaders and impacts one of the following: the school, department, team, or grade level. Ultimately, the action plan describes the role of teacher leadership in bringing about a positive change in the learning environment. In conjunction, for the graduate students enrolled in the course who are classroom teachers, the action plan enhances their perceived autonomy (Bogler, 2001). Because teachers are on the frontline and interact daily with students, teacher leadership is framed by a set of principles that acknowledges teachers are positioned to make informed decisions and promote needed changes to improve the teaching and learning process. From this perspective, ***ESED 8131 Teacher Leadership*** is grounded by the Teacher Leader Model Standards. The standards provide an effective framework for promoting teacher leadership and include the following (TLEC, 2008, p. 9):

- Fostering a Collaborative Culture to Support Educator Development and Student Learning
- Accessing and Using Research to Improve Practice and Student Learning
- Promoting Professional Learning for Continuous Improvement
- Facilitating Improvements in Instruction and Student Learning

- Promoting the Use of Assessments and Data for School and District Improvement
- Improving Outreach and Collaboration with Families and Community
- Advocating for Student Learning and the Profession

In the following section, brief examples are provided of the recommended actions proposed by graduate students in ***ESED 8131 Teacher Leadership***. For purposes of this paper, each action plan is representative of a standard within the Teacher Leader Model.

3.1 Fostering a Collaborative Culture to Support Educator Development and Student Learning

With the adoption of the *Next Generation Science Standards* (NGSS) in 2013 (NGSS Lead States, 2013), came a requirement to integrate literacy into the discipline of science. A need was determined that students should be able to read, write, and think like a scientist. Edwards High School (pseudonym) decided to incorporate literacy into the curriculum as a professional learning objective for the entire staff. In the absence of outside professional development to expand the skills of the staff, it is essential that teachers who teach literacy step-up to guide this objective. Accordingly, the plan of action being proposed to address this mandate is to develop a professional learning science community (PLC) that specifically permits science teachers to meet with literacy teachers once a month to discuss, share, and develop science lessons that incorporate literacy practices.

3.2 Accessing and Using Research to Improve Practice and Student Learning

Continuous improvement in academic achievement is consistently the focus within Arlington Public Schools and Jetton Elementary School (pseudonyms). Recent local school data indicate that 5th-grade students did not demonstrate gains in language arts on the Georgia Milestones Assessment (GMAS) from 2017 to 2018. In addition to this, district assessments indicated a decreasing trend during the progression of the 2017-2018 school year in the percentage of students scoring in the distinguished and proficient range in language arts. While the school administration continues to target teacher-focused initiatives from the local school plan for improvement (LSPI) such as collaborative planning, assessment planning, language arts staff development and assistance from language art instructional coach, little is done with student engagement and motivation in assessment specifically. The purpose of this initiative is to develop a solution that combats the problem of lack of achievement in 5th-grade language arts performance by teacher leaders. This strategy will also address student involvement in the

assessment process. The 5th Grade will research the experts in the field to develop a template for conveying student performance on language arts curriculum standards and performance.

3.3 Promoting Professional Learning for Continuous Improvement

An on-going lack of achievement in math has adversely impacted our school's student progress toward mastering standards, test scores, and progress toward an improved perception of the effectiveness of our maths teaching. Much emphasis has been placed on and resources allocated to reading improvement that math teaching and learning has become a secondary priority. With the current prominence of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) education and the Georgia Standards of Excellence (GSE), the rigour, pacing, and complexity of math instruction has intensified. As a teacher leader, I propose a Vertical Math Team for grades K-5. This will bring teacher leaders together to conduct an inquiry into research-based methods, strategies, and interventions which will lead to a school-wide improvement in math. At our school, student achievement in math is measured by the STAR Math Assessment and the Georgia Milestones Assessment System (GMAS). With the implementation of a K-5 Vertical Math Team, it would be expected that students' scores would increase at each grade level beyond the increases of the previous year.

3.4 Facilitating Improvements in Instruction and Student Learning

As a Title One school, my current school faces many challenges involving our population of students. It is well-known that students who are reading on grade level by third grade are more likely to find success academically. Students who are not reading on grade-level by third grade continue to develop larger gaps in their reading skills; thus, making academic achievement more difficult for them. To work on filling gaps in phonics for our students, my school adopted a program called System 44 three years ago. The program begins in third grade and continues to be used in fourth and fifth grades. Unfortunately, the fidelity of this program has been impacted primarily because of facilitator turnover. This initiative is meant to address and find a solution to improve the fidelity of the System 44 program through constructing a guideline for new facilitators, a student self-monitoring piece, and fluency checks. As the teacher leader and veteran facilitator, I will mentor the new teachers to help them understand the expectations and guidelines. By approaching the improvements as mentorship, the teacher leader will allow for informal relationships to be made, ensure that the new teachers take ownership in the program, and continue to improve the fidelity of the program.

3.5 Promoting the Use of Assessments and Data for School and District Improvement

First-grade students read below grade level at Pebblebrook Elementary School (pseudonym). An evaluation of first grade reading assessments and monthly Lexile charts over nine weeks, each displayed a critical need for students to get on the right track by reading at grade level. Currently, the implementation of iStation has been a reading technology resource to use by all teachers in the school district. As a teacher leader, I propose that first-grade teachers utilize iStation each day for 30 minutes for their students. My goal is for first-grade teachers to collaborate weekly, utilizing student progress from iStation priority reports that target specific reading skills for each struggling student. With this information, first-grade teachers will plan instruction accordingly that targets each student's reading needs.

3.6 Improving Outreach and Collaboration with Families and Community

This action plan will address the transition planning issues within the special education department in the Green County School District (pseudonym) to help improve the district's overall effectiveness in transitioning students with disabilities from middle to high school. The main problem identified is the overall insufficient knowledge in regards to the transition planning process for teachers, parents, and students that impacts the special education department at both the middle and high school. Workshops will be conducted to provide the essential policies and procedures that must be followed to help parents and their students, with the assistance of special education teachers, make the transition to high school with needed services in place.

3.7 Advocating for Student Learning and the Profession

The lack of prepared enrichment activities for students at Hill County High School (pseudonym) has a negative impact on both student engagement and participation during the weekly Enrichment period. Students who are not individually sought out by teachers to make-up tests or complete missed assignments are either allowed to leave campus if they have a personal automobile or wait in the gym for the 81 minutes of the Enrichment period. During this time, students typically sit in the bleachers and socialize or, more often, play on their phones. However, this weekly Enrichment period has the potential to provide educators within the school building a significant amount of autonomy concerning how they want to enhance the learning of their students. Alongside administrators and department heads, teacher leaders will create enriching activities designed to teach creative problem-solving, pertinent life skills, and

teamwork. These activities will span all grade levels and focus on a particular academic prep for each session.

4. Conclusion

A core tenet that is the foundation of US democracy is that all students deserve an education - an education that is equal to all students and delivered by teachers who have the pedagogical knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions to meet their students' needs. This paper has briefly addressed failed reform laws that brought about the unwanted consequences for schools, their leaders, teachers, and students, and the growing need to promote teachers as leaders who can be instrumental in all matters of school improvement and student achievement. It promotes the belief that teachers are leaders. As such, the paper offered a small glimpse into one graduate-level course as a means to facilitate others who may be planning to develop the appropriate curriculum to support an advanced level degree to enhance the teaching profession by establishing teachers as leaders.

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