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Understanding Teacher Leadership

Being a teacher leader means sharing and representing relevant and key ideas of our work as teachers in contexts beyond our individual classrooms so as to improve the education of our students and our ability to provide it for them.

Ariel Sacks, Eighth Grade Teacher Leader

Hardworking educators struggle every day within a system that was not designed for the needs of today's students. In spite of the skepticism of the public and the ensuing policy reports that reveal failures within our educational system, most teachers are committed to searching for answers to improve student outcomes, although other demands compete for their attention. The unending need to find social services for students and their families, competitive challenges from advocates of charter schools and school vouchers, and the dwindling numbers of capable individuals who want to become teachers and school administrators create distractions from the challenge committed educators face in improving student learning.

Over the last 25 years, the massive number of reports on how to improve schools influenced policymakers to pass legislation placing

Definition of Teacher Leadership

There is common agreement that we are a long way from a widespread understanding of teacher leadership. Confusion about definitions and expectations of teacher leaders abound (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Just what does teacher leadership look like? Who are teacher leaders? In the past, when we visited groups that were interested in teacher leadership, there was a request for time to clarify the concept of teacher leadership. Now we face a different predicament. Since teacher leadership is popular in the educator's professional jargon, there is a reluctance to examine the concept, because everyone believes he or she knows what it means. Regardless of the interest or lack of interest in defining teacher leadership, we believe a dialogue about the definition provides the foundation for a common understanding in order to promote and support teacher leaders.

We arrived at our definition of teacher leadership after a review of the educational literature, careful consideration of our experiences, and much conversation with teacher leaders, principals, and others. This definition continues to evolve as we continue our exploration and learning. Our definition is teachers leaders lead within and beyond the classroom; identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders; influence others toward improved educational practice; and accept responsibility for achieving the outcomes of their leadership.

Lead Within and Beyond the Classroom

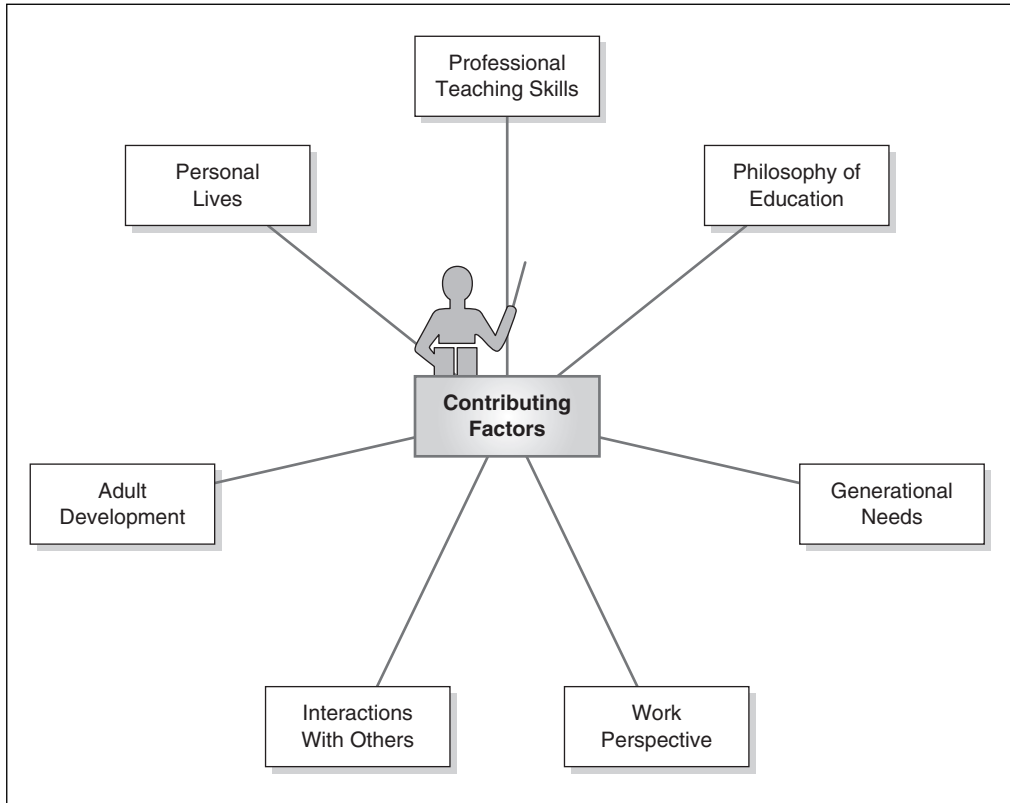
The professional teacher is first of all competent in the classroom through the facilitation of students' learning. Teacher leadership is allowed by other teachers when the teacher is perceived as a capable teacher of students. Little (1995) cited legitimacy for leadership as a prerequisite for teacher leaders in their influence of peers. This legitimacy can only be given by other teachers and not by a positional title. Teachers we meet clearly accept this part of the leadership role, and some even recognize that they can transfer many classroom skills to their work with peers. Teachers can be leaders of change beyond their classrooms by accepting more responsibility for helping colleagues to achieve success for all of the students and for the total school program.

The level of involvement in teacher leadership beyond the classroom depends on the context of the school and the school system as well as the teacher's willingness. Most important, teachers do not have to divorce themselves from focusing on teaching and learning to be

Figure 1.1 Teacher Leadership Readiness Instrument*Assessing Your Readiness for***Teacher Leadership**

Respond to the following statements in terms of how strongly you agree or disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. My work as a teacher is both meaningful and important.					
2. Individual teachers should be able to influence how other teachers think about, plan for, and conduct their work with students.					
3. Teachers should be recognized for trying new teaching strategies whether they succeed or fail.					
4. Teachers should decide on the best methods of meeting educational goals set by policymaking groups (e.g., school boards, state departments of education).					
5. I am willing to observe and provide feedback to fellow teachers.					
6. I would like to spend time discussing my values and beliefs about teaching with my colleagues.					
7. It is important to me to have the respect of the administrators and other teachers at my school.					

(Continued)

Figure 4.2 Factors Contributing to the Uniqueness of Teachers

Professional Teaching Skills

Before others will accept a teacher as a leader, that teacher must be successful with his or her students. Instructional proficiency is necessary to lead effectively with students in the classroom and to establish credibility with peers and administrators. The strategies may not be found in the lesson plans, but the teacher's ability to effectively adjust the instruction reflects a high level of skill development. If a teacher is not proficient in teaching skills, then the focus in the classroom is on a survival level. This teacher will need to develop classroom expertise before leading beyond the classroom. On the Teacher Leader Self-Assessment, the scale that refers to these behaviors is called Instructional Proficiency and Leadership; that is, teacher leaders possess and use professional knowledge and skills in providing the most effective learning opportunities for both students and adults.

Figure 6.4 Influencing Action Plan (IAP) Steps

<p>STEP 1: Current Information About the Issue: How do you know this is a problem?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explanation of issue • Rationale for selecting the issue • Narrative description of context, including a summary of student and faculty demographics as well as a description of the school culture and leadership information • Data to support your concerns: student performance, attendance, disciplinary concerns, teacher concerns, and other information (can be either qualitative or quantitative) • Your position (and general information about you) and your role in advocating an approach to this issue <p>STEP 2: Likelihood of Addressing the Issue: How do you know that this issue can be effectively addressed?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparative data (e.g., data from similar schools, county/state/national data) and characteristics/needs of the learner in relation to this issue (e.g., research on how learners like those in your school best learn math) <p>STEP 3: Ideal Situation: What would be the ideal situation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideal behaviors or levels of performance; benchmarks for the learner <p>STEP 4: Existing Strategies: What is known about strategies that are being used to address this issue now?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existing strategies and programs in place to address the issue, whether they are or are not effective <p>STEP 5: Research and Best Practices: What is known about other strategies that could address this issue?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research and best practices related to the issue (may include interviews and information gained from other schools with programs that address your issue) • Based on the research, the ideal teaching and learning environment: How will you adapt curriculum, schedule, and other relevant concerns to address the issue? <p>STEP 6: Selected Strategies and Action Steps: What strategies will be used to reach the ideal situation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process to promote IAP in your school/district and your role in this process • Key stakeholders and strategies you will use to influence them in advocating for your issue • Professional learning needs of those who will implement the plan
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Source: Adapted from Calhoun, 2002.