Chapter 3
An Integral Analysis of One Urban School System’s Efforts to Support Student-Centered Teaching

Shari Good
University of Calgary, Canada

Veronika Bohac Clarke
University of Calgary, Canada

ABSTRACT

This chapter analyzes the case of one urban public school district’s efforts to provide coherent support for student-centered teaching across all the high schools, through the role of the Learning Leader. The Learning Leader designation replaced the previous Department Head or Curriculum Leader role. The implementation of this change of designation created numerous challenges due to various interpretations of the role. The district’s efforts to provide professional development for the Learning Leaders was also caught up in the context of conflicting interpretations of the role of the Learning Leader. This chapter provides an analysis of the implementation of this change, including the use of the Integral Model (Wilber, 2006) to examine the interviews with high school Learning Leaders and principals, and the Professional Development program offered by the district. A number of recommendations are provided for enhancing the role of the Learning Leaders to optimize their work with teachers.

INTRODUCTION

The current political climate of accountability, performance, and achievement in the province of Alberta, Canada, has placed greater emphasis on increased high school completion rates as a measure of student success (Alberta Education, 2009). Today Alberta secondary schools are not only being held responsible for raised completion rates and student outcomes in compliance with government expectations, but, due to an increased public demand, for more efficient schools and school leaders as well (Wright & Mari-
An Integral Analysis of One Urban School System’s Efforts to Support Student-Centered Teaching

This pressure has created a shift in the core work of school leaders toward a deeper focus on high quality educational experiences that promote the development of qualities and competencies central to learning and life (Slater, 2008).

Today, the term school leader does not only refer to a principal or assistant principal of a school, but also includes those teacher leaders employed to lead the instructional and managerial work of a subject department. These teacher leaders have many titles, such as curriculum leader, department head, pastoral lead, or middle manager, but for the purpose of this study are referred to as learning leaders. The definition of a learning leader employed throughout is a teacher who undertakes formal leadership roles that have both managerial and pedagogical responsibilities, and include leading a subject area team and fulfilling expectations and goals as directed by the school principal. This definition was designed by examining and blending characterizations of similar formalized teacher leadership positions recognized within western countries (Aubrey-Hopkins & James, 2002; Busher & Harris, 1999; Fitzgerald, 2009; Turner, 2007; Weller, 2001).

Learning leaders, as formal teacher leaders, now have to manage the increasing expectations and often competing demands of a rapidly changing educational system. As a result, the scope of the learning leader’s role has expanded to include monitoring and coaching duties, contributions to school policy, the development of professional relationships, improvement of teacher practices, and the encouragement of a liaison between staff and principal. The learning leader is now expected to function as an agent of change, as the emerging needs of today’s students, school leadership and teaching strategies will require practices that are “engaging, motivating, appropriately challenging, varied and differentiated” (Stoll, 2009, p. 120).

Secondary schools in the province of Alberta, Canada, follow a hierarchical structure consisting of a principal, one or two assistant principals depending on the size of the school, and a team of learning leaders who support the work of teachers, who are typically organized by a subject, pastoral, or specialized program grouping. The formalized leadership position of learning leaders is often a one-year term, sometimes selected by a committee through a competitive formal review process, and other times appointed by the school principal. The roles and the delegated responsibilities of the learning leaders in secondary schools are diverse, often complex, and can vary widely according to country, department, school, and urban location (Weller, 2001).

Course content and subject areas dominate high school teaching, which in turn creates an organizational structure of departments staffed with teachers trained and designated to be subject experts. Harris (2000) describes the secondary school department structure as an “important missing link in school improvement” (p. 1), noting that the lack of research focused at the level of the department is unfortunate as its organization has a significant impact on teacher practice and student learning. In the high school system the department, as the hub for subject, curriculum, or program areas, requires a leader at the helm to organize and supervise the work being carried out. Learning leaders fulfill this function and, in doing so, are accountable to the school principal for the work of the staff in their specific area of responsibility (Bush, Hammersley-Fletcher, & Turner, 2007). The scope and extent of the learning leaders’ responsibility is defined and observed by the school principal (Hammersley-Fletcher & Brundett, 2008).

High school learning leaders serve as school leaders both within their respective departments and in the context of the school leadership team (Zepeda & Kruskamp, 2007). Positioned in the middle of the school hierarchy, learning leaders also act as a bridge between the teachers in their departments and the school principal. This linking function is one of the central attributes in defining a learning leader position (Bush, Hammersley-Fletcher, & Turner, 2007), which Wettersten (1993) describes as neither fish nor fowl.
22 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the product’s webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/an-integral-analysis-of-one-urban-school-systems-efforts-to-support-student-centered-teaching/163486?camid=4v1


Related Content

The Relationship between Transformational Leadership Characteristics and Multicultural Education Practices in Teacher Educators
www.igi-global.com/chapter/the-relationship-between-transformational-leadership-characteristics-and-multicultural-education-practices-in-teacher-educators/146309?camid=4v1a

Engaging Assessment Tools for the Twenty-First Century Students
www.igi-global.com/chapter/engaging-assessment-tools-for-the-twenty-first-century-students/202105?camid=4v1a

Responsive Practices in Online Teacher Education
www.igi-global.com/chapter/responsive-practices-in-online-teacher-education/153366?camid=4v1a

A Critical Review of EFL Teacher Supervision Models
www.igi-global.com/article/a-critical-review-of-efl-teacher-supervision-models/217455?camid=4v1a