Chapter 9

Not Just a Teacher:
A Path to Teacher Leadership

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author reflects on her development as a teacher leader. Using self-study based in narrative inquiry, she describes the current interest in teacher leadership and why it has become such a prominent topic in education. By exploring her own experiences in light of current research on the topic, she analyzes how teachers become leaders, the benefits to the profession of teacher leadership, some of the challenges teacher leaders face, and possible paths forward for teacher leaders. In addition, she delineates new expectations and challenges facing today’s literacy leaders.

INTRODUCTION

The first time someone introduced me as a teacher leader, it caught me off guard. Like many teachers, I initially found the notion of identifying myself as a teacher leader somewhat uncomfortable. Me? A leader? I’m just a teacher.

Over time I came to understand that others did perceive me as a teacher leader. When the position of curriculum director opened in our district, at least a dozen teachers and other staff members expressed their conviction that I would or should be moving into the position. Although I had no intention of applying I was still curious why so many people thought I should. A colleague asserted that I had earned the respect of my peers by demonstrating my commitment to learning to improve my teaching, but especially by what she termed my “generosity”—the fact that I share my time, ideas, resources, and learning because I care deeply for my own students as well as the other students throughout the school. My coworker pointed out that my enthusiasm for teaching translates to luncheon conversations, emails, tweets, and Facebook posts about new possibilities for use in my classroom. I considered how another colleague, an algebra teacher, shared that even though I teach English, she loves to receive articles I pass on to her about teaching mathematics. I’ve learned about my field through various professional

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organizations and with the educational network I’ve become part of over time. Eventually the idea that I am seen as a leader—that I might be a leader—seemed more plausible.

I was left wondering about the term teacher leader and what exactly it meant. I’d been hearing it a lot, but I wasn’t really sure what the term referred to. This spurred me to search for more information about teacher leadership. I created a research project to investigate questions that would help me define the term: What is teacher leadership? What does it mean to be a teacher leader? How can a teacher become a leader? In what ways is teacher leadership important? Why now?

**BACKGROUND**

**What Is Teacher Leadership?**

In the early 21st century researchers and educators have shown a growing interest in the concept of teacher leadership, yet the term remains somewhat hard to define. A small explosion of books has been published on the subject in the past several years—a search of the term “teacher leadership” on the Amazon bookseller website brings up at least three dozen titles published in the last ten years alone. Yet the exact role teacher leadership comprises remains difficult to describe in any succinct fashion. This difficulty may be due to the fact that teacher leadership is often informal, or to the reality that teacher leadership manifests in a myriad of forms that move beyond the roles to which only a few teachers are appointed, such as team leaders, department chairs, and other positions that are often seen as stepping stones to a career in administration (Danielson, 2006). Teachers may lead from their roles in their classroom, from roles outside the classroom (such as a literacy coach or instructional specialist), or from formal leadership roles (Hirsh & Killion, 2007). Much of the current interest in teacher leadership focuses on informal practices of genuine leadership precisely because these practices are wide-reaching and lead to better classroom instruction and improved learning outcomes for students (Danielson, 2006). It is this collaborative approach to leadership, in which teacher leaders “collectively share with colleagues their specialized knowledge, expertise, and experience [that] can help principals broaden and sustain school and classroom improvement efforts” (Lumpkin, Claxton, & Wilson, 2014).

No special title is engraved on a nameplate outside the door for educators who focus on work in the classroom yet also observe how that work is seated in the broader context of our schools, our districts, our states, our nation, and our profession as a whole. It is fair to say that much teacher leadership is defined through action, not appointment. Often that action is driven not by a desire to be recognized as a leader, but by a teacher’s dedication to shaping the course of events to ensure the best outcomes for all students (Danielson, 2006; Boyd-Dimock & McGree, 1995). The collaborative teacher leader aims to hone her own skills while “impact[ing] a broader audience, and strengthen[ing] the unity of the entire campus structure” (Lumpkin et al., 2014).

Teacher leadership in this sense is not a top-down affair. Rather than subscribing to a hierarchical structure of leadership, teachers tend to see leadership as a collaborative effort in which teachers work together to promote professional development and growth and improved educational services (Boyd-Dimock & McGree, 1995). Teacher leadership, expertise, and collaboration go hand-in-hand (Hirsch & Killion, 2007). Frequently teacher leadership springs from a willingness to garner and share expertise with peers, administrators, students, and the broader education community. Teachers are...
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