TEACHER LEADERSHIP: ITS NATURE, DEVELOPMENT, AND IMPACT ON SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past four years, my colleagues, students and I have conducted a series of six studies on teacher leadership. Three of these studies, grounded in design (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), relied on qualitative data to describe the nature of informal teacher leadership in both elementary and secondary schools (Anderson, 2002; Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach, 1999; Ryan, 1999). The remaining three studies inquired about the effects of teacher leadership on selected aspects of school organisation, as well as on students (Leithwood and Jantzi, 1999; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000); in these three studies, which tested a framework for understanding leadership effects using quantitative methods, teacher leader effects were compared with the effects of principal leadership. Throughout the chapter some or all of these studies are referred to as the 'CLD research' (CLD is the acronym for the Centre for Leadership Development, our institutional home within OISE/UT).

Each of the six studies conceptualised leadership as an influence process (Yukl, 1989) that depends on a person's behaviour being recognised as, and at least tacitly acknowledged to be, 'leadership' by others who thereby cast themselves in the role of followers consenting to be led (Greenfield, 1995; Lord and Maher, 1993). From this perspective, leadership is 'the process of being perceived as a leader' (Lord and Maher, 1993: p. 11) through the social construction of meaning on the part of followers (Meindl, 1995).

This chapter summarises evidence and implications from the six studies to briefly answer three questions: What is 'teacher leadership'? How much does it contribute to a school's effectiveness? And how can it be

developed? In light of the answers to these questions, the paper concludes by briefly considering whether teacher leadership is actually a useful concept.

WHAT IS 'TEACHER LEADERSHIP'?

Background

Leadership, suggest Sirotnik and Kimball (1996), does not take on new meaning when qualified by the term 'teacher'. It entails the exercise of influence over the beliefs, actions, and values of others (Hart, 1995), as is the case with leadership from any source. What may be different is how that influence is exercised and to what end. In a traditional school, for example, those in formal administrative roles have greater access than teachers to positional power in their attempts to influence classroom practice, whereas teachers may have greater access to the power that flows from technical expertise. Traditionally, as well, teachers and administrators often attempt to exercise leadership in relation to quite different aspects of the school's functioning, although teachers often report a strong interest in expanding their spheres of influence (Reavis and Griffith, 1993; Taylor and Bogotch, 1994).

Teacher leadership may be either formal or informal in nature. Lead teacher, master teacher, department head, union representative, member of the school's governance council, mentor – these are among the many designations associated with formal teacher leadership roles. Teachers assuming these roles are expected to carry out a wide range of functions. These functions include, for example: representing the school in district-level decision-making (Fullan, 1993); stimulating the professional growth of colleagues (Wasley, 1991); being an advocate for teachers' work (Bascia, 1997); and improving the school's decision-making processes (Malen, Ogawa and Kranz, 1990). Those appointed to formal leadership roles also are sometimes expected to induct new teachers into the school, and to positively influence the willingness and capacity of other teachers to implement change in the school (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1991; Whitaker, 1995).

Teachers exercise informal leadership in their schools by sharing their expertise, by volunteering for new projects and by bringing new ideas to the school. They also offer such leadership by helping their colleagues to carry out their classroom duties, and by assisting in the improvement of classroom practice through the engagement of their colleagues in experimentation and the examination of more powerful instructional techniques. Teachers attribute leadership qualities, as well, to colleagues who accept responsibility for their own professional growth, promote the school's mission and work for the improvement of the school or the school

system (Harrison and Lembeck, 1996; Smylie and Denny, 1990; Wasley, 1991).

CLD research

Functions reported for teacher leaders in this literature created expectations about what we might find were the functions of teacher leaders in our study. But the three studies specifically inquiring about the nature of informal teacher leadership were guided by the principles of grounded theory development. Methodologically, all three studies were conducted in two stages. During the first stage, all teachers in selected schools were asked to respond to a one-page, confidential questionnaire requesting them to nominate people in their schools, exclusive of administrators, who provided leadership. At the second stage, the three people receiving the most nominations by their colleagues in each school, along with the nominators, were interviewed. Questions focused on what it was that caused the nominees to be viewed as leaders and what they did to provide leadership.

Based on the application of 'constant comparative' coding methods recommended for the development of grounded theory, results suggested that teachers' perceptions of informal teacher leadership could be described in terms of traits, capacities, practices, and outcomes. Results from Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach (1999) illustrate much of what has been learned about each of these categories.

Traits. In these studies of teacher leaders in six secondary schools, 75 specific traits were identified from a total of 341 units of coded text. These traits were further classified as mood, values, orientation to people, physical characteristics, responsibility, personality, and work-related traits. The most frequently mentioned specific trait was 'quietness'; being unassuming and soft-spoken was highly valued by these teachers. The next most frequently mentioned specific traits were: having a sense of commitment to the school and/or the profession; having a sense of humour; being a hard worker; and possessing an appreciative orientation to others.

Personality characteristics were mentioned 69 times. This category of trait included being unselfish, intelligent, genuine, humble and energetic. Values were mentioned 58 times and included commitment to the school and/or profession, having strong beliefs and being fair. Mood, mentioned 53 times, included being quiet, having a sense of humour, and being even-tempered. Work ethic also was mentioned 53 times, a category which included: being determined; not appearing to be 'empire-building'; being a visionary; and having high standards. Responsibility was discussed 34 times. This category included: being a hard worker; being steady; and being dependable. Physical characteristics, being tall or big, were mentioned only three times.

Capacities. This category encompasses a leader's knowledge, skills and/or abilities. One hundred and fifty-nine items coded in this category were organised into seven dimensions: procedural knowledge; declarative knowledge; relationships with staff; problem-solving ability; relationships with students; communication skills; and self-knowledge.

The most frequently mentioned skills were associated with procedural and declarative knowledge. Procedural knowledge had to do with a teacher's knowledge of how to carry out leadership tasks, e.g., making tough decisions, knowing how to run a meeting, and dealing with administration. As teachers said: '[she] can put out fires without too much trouble'; '[he] knows how to handle a situation without implicating anyone else'; or '[she] knows how to evaluate our students, modify programs, develop report cards'.

The declarative knowledge category refers to knowledge about specific aspects of the profession, e.g., knowledge about government education policy; knowledge about education in general; knowledge about the school, students and the community; knowledge about specific subjects; and knowledge about union issues.

Teachers' ability to work well with their colleagues included statements about how a particular teacher can motivate staff, work effectively with others and be willing to moderate disagreements. Being a good problem-solver was seen as an important leadership capacity. For example, one teacher said, '[she] can listen to a discussion and, in the end, filter it all down to what the real problems are'. Getting to the heart of the matter or being able to synthesise information was mentioned five times. Dealing with difficulties well and being able to think things through are other examples of statements coded as problem-solving skills.

The capacity to relate well with students, particularly being able to motivate them and being able to understand them, was valued among teacher leaders, as was having good communication skills (being articulate and persuasive). Statements coded as self-knowledge referred to a leader's ability to change, and to 'know what she is doing'. '[She] knows she can't win all of her battles.'

Practices. What leaders actually do is what we coded as 'practices' in our studies. These functions, tasks, and activities, were organised into nine dimensions. The most frequently mentioned dimension was that the teacher performs administrative tasks, such as working administrative periods in the office, being on committees, and organising specific events (e.g., running the commencement programme and spearheading the implementation of special courses). Modelling valued practices was the next most frequently mentioned dimension. This included leading by example, interacting with students, being a motivator for staff and students, and never missing a day of work. One teacher said, 'he sets the example that there are many teachers who have taught for a long time and who are excellent teachers'. Another said, 'he reminds us of our objectives'.

Formal leadership responsibilities were frequently mentioned. This dimension reflects the number of times teachers were nominated as leaders because of their position, e.g., being a department head or being head of a particular committee. Supporting the work of other staff was associated by many respondents with leadership; this referred to the help the teacher provided to his or her colleagues (e.g., helps young teachers, helps with course outlines, helps with a difficult class) or the support given to staff (e.g., 'kind of stroking people and saying you can do it', 'speaks out on our behalf whether we agree or disagree', 'allows people to vent').

Teachers felt being visible in the school was an important dimension of leadership. Examples of this practice include: presenting information at staff meetings and being a leader in the school not just in the department. Specific teaching practices (e.g., having lessons well prepared and being a good teacher) often were mentioned. Confronting issues directly, sharing leadership with others, and personal relationships were the last three dimensions of practices mentioned by the interviewees.

Outcomes. The outcomes associated with leadership provide important clues about the basis for leader attributions under circumstances in which leadership is experienced long enough to draw inferences from leader effects on the organisation, not simply on existing leader stereotypes. Outcomes of leadership identified by 'followers' tell us something about the needs people have that they hope leadership can meet. One hundred and sixty-two statements were coded as nine different dimensions of outcomes. Most frequently mentioned was gaining the respect of staff and students. Next most frequently identified as a leadership outcome was that activities involving the leader were invariably implemented well ('it went off very well' or 'things always work out in the end' or 'he and [T] have taken the track team to extreme heights'). The fact that people listen to the leader was mentioned frequently; one interviewee said, for example, 'when she speaks up, people listen'.

Being widely perceived as a leader was mentioned often. One teacher said, 'people turn to him for leadership in the school'. Another said, 'I think he's someone they would turn to if they were looking for avenues to proceed'. A desire to emulate the leader was mentioned: 'She makes you want to put as much effort forth as she does'; 'You're just saying, hey, if I could be like that'. Having a good effect on students, contributing to the culture of the school ('he adds to the heart of the school'), enhancing staff comfort level and meeting high expectations were other types of outcomes associated with those teachers nominated as leaders by their peers.