

Reforming Schools through Teacher Leadership: A Program for Classroom Teachers as Agents of Change

by Lauren McCay, Joe Flora, Anne Hamilton, and John F. Riley

Educational leadership has increasingly become a focal point of emerging trends in school reform and accountability. Classroom teachers at all levels are assuming greater roles of responsibility and leadership in this process of change. Though widely recognized as a critical factor in school reform, teacher leadership has been the subject of relatively few deliberate attempts at analysis and development. The purpose of this article is to describe the University of Montevallo Teacher Leader Program, an advanced graduate program in current and future leadership roles for teachers who choose to remain in the classroom rather than become principals and supervisors.

In *The Nature of Leadership*, Gardner provides a straightforward definition of leadership: the process by which an individual induces a group to pursue the objectives of the individual.¹ This definition is echoed throughout the literature. Gardner also calls for the demystification of the term "leadership." He asserts that "there seems to be a feeling that if we invoke it often enough and with sufficient ardor we can ease our sense of having lost our way, our sense of things unaccomplished, of duties unfulfilled."²

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Theoretical Framework

In a recent synthesis of current literature on educational leadership with emerging trends in school reform and accountability, Marsh contends that previous attempts to identify school leadership with a strong role accorded the school principal are outmoded. He cites recent research suggesting that the old role of the principal as "a solitary instructional leader" is inadequate given the new emphasis on student learning results and high-stakes accountability. The traditional view that emphasizes the directive and clinical roles of principals was probably never effective and certainly will not be in the future. Pellicer and Anderson point out that, from a practical standpoint alone, principals may have increasing difficulty being the sole instructional leaders in schools. Conflicting demands facing principals, the need for extended time devoted to instructional programs, and the need for instructional supervisors who have the expertise and commitment to support and guide teachers as they develop and implement curricula all point to an increased leadership role for teachers in schools.³

Marsh proposes that the role of the school principal and school leadership as a whole should be re-conceptualized within three perspectives of emerging theory and practice. In the cultural-school transformation perspective, principals and other school leaders must work to create an empowering learning community, focused on collaboration, reflection, and moral purpose. In these schools, leaders "work from the middle rather than the top of the organization," requiring new skills for staff members such as collaborative skills and expertise in curriculum and instructional improvement.⁴

The second perspective identified by Marsh is the strategic and results-driven approach. Schools restructured as a result of high-stakes accountability and a focus on student learning necessitate leaders who are comfortable with sys-



tems that are “tightly coupled around results and loosely coupled around means for training these results.” These schools typically represent a combination of “system-defined performance standards and locally-defined views of market niche and customer satisfaction.”⁵

The final perspective offered by Marsh suggests that school leaders need to integrate the management functions of the school, such as personnel, budgeting, and information systems, with the instructional reforms required by the focus on learning results. Management services must support the vision of the educational program in a much more effective, integrated fashion. All school leaders must become more adept at using these services to strengthen improvements in teaching and learning.⁶

For Marsh, these themes are integrated in a leadership concept that envisions the principal primarily as a strategic leader, one who nurtures cultural transformation and empowerment of the staff, links management services with increased student achievement, and provides substantive program leadership by restructuring schoolwork around high-performance teams. From these restructured work teams, many school leaders emerge with an all-important educational focus on student results. They will have considerable authority and knowledge to redirect traditional functions, such as fiscal information and personnel management, to impact student learning more directly. Innovation in curriculum and instruction will be directed not by the principal alone but by multiple work teams in which “[new forms] of expertise and learning community driven by results are dominant.”⁷

Background on Teacher Leadership

For years many teachers have assumed and been successful in important leadership roles in schools, e.g., department chair, team or project leader, and committee chair. Bolman and Deal point to this fact when they state that “good leaders, like good teachers, are as good at listening and sensing as they are at persuading and teaching. . . . [T]hey, like other leaders, shape relationships that make a measurable difference in others’ lives.” Thus, although many teachers do not take on traditional administrative assignments, they nevertheless participate in many leadership functions within the school. Bolman and Deal further assert that “what distinguishes leadership from other kinds of relationships is that, when it works well, it enables people to collaborate in the service of shared visions, values, and missions”—the shared vision, of course, being better schools.⁸

Researchers investigating teacher leadership generally agree that teacher leadership and administrative leadership are not the same thing. Urbanski and Nickolaou advance the view that administrative leadership is primarily managerial, while the emphasis in teacher leadership is more collegial.⁹ Attempts to shift the role of principals to focus more on instructional leadership still leave a gap between principals and teachers that teacher leaders can fill.¹⁰ Conley and Muncey even found differences in the perceptions of leadership roles between teachers who were classroom-based and those who were not (i.e., in support-service roles). Non-classroom-based teachers viewed their tasks as those of mentoring, modeling, and translating external programs into the schools. Emphasizing their roles as liaisons, they

pointed to the quasi-administrative aspects of their jobs. Classroom-based teachers saw their roles as team leaders primarily in terms of handling paperwork for the team, making sure all members of the team participated in discussion, and making sure meetings stayed on task.¹¹

This emphasis on the collaborative aspects of teacher leadership is both a benefit and a challenge. Coyle asserts that teacher collaboration is a first step in teacher leadership.¹² Wasley views the role of teacher leaders as inspiring colleagues to change, to do things they would not ordinarily do without the influence of leaders.¹³ To engage in such collaboration and collegial interactions with their peers, teacher leaders abandon their privateness.¹⁴

The practice of teacher leadership is much more complex than the theory.¹⁵ According to Sherrill, recent case studies have reported high levels of frustration from teachers piloting new leadership roles. The reported frustrations of these teachers and their lack of self-efficacy indicate that the teacher leader roles called for in reform efforts need greater definition and that teachers need to have more purposeful preparation.¹⁶

Urbanski and Nickolaou point to the Carnegie report "A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century," the establishment in 1987 of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and interest in schoolwide and districtwide opportunities for teacher involvement as pivotal events in the teacher leadership movement. As a result, teacher leadership became synonymous with the drive toward greater professionalism for teachers. This movement has led to several different approaches for the development of teacher leaders.¹⁷

In urban districts, teachers began to exert leadership in support of educational innovations through their unions. The move to site-based management models supported this approach. Toledo, Dade County, Cincinnati, Hammond, Columbus, Los Angeles, and Rochester are cited as districts that developed teacher leadership through site-based restructuring.¹⁸

Colleges and universities have supported the development of teacher leaders as part of the growing trend toward professional development schools. Professional development schools frequently provide opportunities to develop teacher leaders by having them mentor future teachers.¹⁹

Although these approaches are admirable, very little attention has been paid to designing

programs specifically to prepare teacher leaders. Bolman and Deal point out that although traditional preservice and in-service programs help teachers to understand students, teaching methods, and curriculum, teachers are "almost never provided with lenses to help them understand the nature of leadership and the complex systems in which leadership is exercised."²⁰ According to Sherrill, universities and states are quickly adopting changes and altering requirements for teacher preparation, but they are not simultaneously developing and offering programs to prepare the teacher leaders who are expected to implement the changes. Teachers are expected to assume leadership roles with little or no preparation.²¹

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Thus graduate programs specifically designed to prepare teacher leaders are rare.

Program Description

The Teacher Leader program at the University of Montevallo (U.M.) is designed to prepare credentialed classroom teachers who hold a master's degree but wish to remain in the classroom (rather than move into school administration) for both current and future leadership roles. In the U.M. Teacher Leader program, an Ed.S. degree and the highest level of teacher certification in Alabama are earned simultaneously. Selected participants progress through a two-year course sequence in cohort groups. The first cohort started the program in the fall semester of 1999, and the second began in the summer term of 2000.

This program is specifically designed to give experienced classroom teachers the knowledge and skills to assume more active roles in education reform and local school renewal by serving as faculty leaders and mentors. Such knowledge and skills cut across the teaching disciplines and across grade levels and age groupings. Thus, the program is interdisciplinary and collaborative, one that centers on problems, issues, and P-12 rather than on isolated and formal fields of study.

The direction and substance of the Teacher Leader program were developed collaboratively by university faculty, students, and public school practitioners, including central office personnel, building administrators, and classroom teachers. Three major premises undergird the Teacher

Leader program. First, pre-service and in-service teacher preparation and development are major emphases, and teachers must assume major leadership roles in staff development through avenues such as mentoring and modeling. Second, improved student learning occurs not only as teachers themselves become better prepared and more expert, but also as teachers assume major leadership roles in the design and development of curricula, the delivery and assessment of instruction, and the general monitoring of instructional programs and student growth. Third, schools will improve only as teachers and administrators understand the context of their communities and situations, e.g., test data, SES data, parent involvement, and community resources. Teachers willing to assume more responsibility for leadership need skills for analyzing data, planning, and assessment in order to improve school and student performance. This program, in general, addresses the concern of Bolman and Deal that “what they don’t teach in [traditional] teacher education is how to broaden your vision, how to sense the social dynamics in your classroom and your school, and how to work with others to transform schools.”²²

Curriculum

The University of Montevallo Teacher Leader program is organized around three curricular strands, which build upon one another in sequential fashion: leadership and policy development, parent and community resources, and best instructional practices. Thirty semester hours of coursework are required; twenty-four hours are taught through three departments of the College of Education, and six hours are electives.

Integrated Competency Areas

Two overarching competency areas considered essential for helping teachers develop as leaders are addressed throughout the program: proficient technology usage, and increased understanding of current school contexts. In all courses, students are taught or required to use technology as a tool of improvement, administratively and instructionally. This includes promoting comfort by using technology, awareness of the availability of technological solutions, and actually using technology for communication, problem solving, program delivery and assessment, and management. Second, all courses in the program are designed to promote an understanding of the

current contexts in which learning, teaching, and schooling take place, including emphasis on such topics as cultural diversity, community agency collaboration, and inclusion.

Leadership and Policy Development

Two courses are offered at the beginning of the program to promote informed and contextual understanding of leadership and policy development for teacher leaders in high-performance work teams. In the first course, “Leadership and Mentor Training,” students examine leadership models most appropriate for the work of teacher leaders, and they engage in mentor training to serve as role models for novice professionals. Interpersonal dimensions, or skills for developing effective relationships within local school contexts, are integral components of this course. Students also address the compatibility of results-oriented assessment and accountability with best professional practices, then analyze these issues in the contexts of their current schools.

The second course, “Legal and Fiscal Management,” is designed to help students better understand linkages between sound legal and financial practices and student achievement. Students prepare and present analyses of selected legal or financial issues that impact their schools.

Parent and Community Resources

In the first course of this strand, “Parent and Family Involvement,” students examine proactive models for engaging families and school personnel in teamwork efforts to support student achievement, empowerment of families, and development of advocacy skills in families and teachers. Students create and present a community-specific model that promotes families as advocates for the shared vision of student achievement, empowered families, and effective schools.

“School Climate Issues,” the course that follows next in sequence, emphasizes a multidisciplinary approach to creating safe and productive environments for members of all school communities. Major topics include the elements of a positive school climate, direct and indirect methods for conflict resolution, and the role of teamwork in promoting mental and physical well-being. Students conduct investigations of the school or community climate in which they are employed.

The third course of this strand, “Public Relations and Community Resources,” provides

students with knowledge and understanding of theory, research, concepts, principles, and strategies concerning public school relations and the availability of community resources as they impact school effectiveness. Sample projects include (a) community resources reviews, in which students analyze districts' community resources and how these resources are used in the school buildings or districts; (b) reviews of the public relations programs or parental-involvement efforts in their school buildings or districts; and (c) presentations of public relations issues in their school districts.

Best Practices in Curriculum and Instruction

The third and last curricular strand of the U.M. Teacher Leader program, which consists of three courses, focuses on best practices in curriculum and instruction. Students in the "Professional Standards" course examine existing and emerging national and state professional standards and practices and then analyze and present the application of these new standards to programs in their current schools. They also gather and analyze school and community data for the initial development of school-improvement plans.

In the final two sequential courses taken over a nine-month period, students design and implement action research studies as the culminating application project of the program. They collaborate with parents, other teachers, students, and administrators in their schools to study problem areas or promising practices that are directly related to improving student learning.

In the first of these courses, students are given an overview of action research (with a focus on collaborative action research) and qualitative-research methods. They are guided through the process of determining a research question, reviewing the related professional literature, and designing systematic plans for data collection and analysis using multiple data sources. Students who teach at the same school are encouraged to plan joint research projects with a broader scope: e.g., school-wide (rather than grade-level) collaboration and extensive community involvement.

The last course involves implementing action research studies. Students collect and analyze the data, interpret the results, then design action plans for school improvement based on the results. School visits by university faculty facilitate ongoing communication, guidance, and support. Formal multimedia presentations of the

action research projects, in addition to written papers, serve as culminating activities and summative assessments of student competencies learned throughout the program.

Methodology

Several instructional strategies appropriate for experienced, practicing professionals are used to encourage and support participant development. Program features include:

- emphasis on methods less common to traditional undergraduate and graduate teacher preparation
- intensive use of community resources
- use of student input regarding methods, activities, and assignments
- an emphasis on continuing professional development in the context of school improvement rather than traditional academic work
- the use of modeling, coaching, and problem-solving focused around "real" problems in the world of practice
- reflection and ongoing dialogue about practice

Assessment

Performance-based assessment strategies are used throughout the program, including juried presentations, staff development at schools, and school-based projects that integrate and apply learning. Implementing and presenting the action research project serve as the comprehensive assessment of student learning in the program.

In addition to these formal assessment strategies, various other forms of evidence to demonstrate the program's impact have been gathered continuously since the program began. The evidence includes writing samples and field logs of teacher leaders, surveys, and anecdotal documentation from participants, school principals, U.M. faculty, and superintendents. A teacher leader program advisory panel made up of students in the first cohort, university faculty, and P-12 school administrators also provides valuable input for the evaluation and future direction of the program.

Participant Feedback

Student writing samples related to personal understandings of teacher leadership were collected from the nineteen teacher leader candidates in the first cohort during their third semester. These writing samples were done at three times:

1. When the semester began, candidates were asked to “quick-write” what they knew about teacher leaders and generate questions they still had relating to the topic;
2. About two weeks into the semester, candidates brainstormed their own descriptors of teacher leaders; and
3. At the end of the semester, teacher-leader candidates wrote what they had learned about themselves and the concept of teacher leader.

It appeared that some students still held a stereotypical view of a leader as the “boss.”

Analysis of strands and patterns of the initial quick-writes showed interesting differences and varying developmental levels among students regarding their perceptions of teacher leaders. All but three of the nineteen candidates viewed teacher leaders as those who instigate change and influence others in their schools. It appeared that some students still held a stereotypical view of a leader as the “boss.” One teacher wrote,

In the teacher leader program, I have become formally aware of the need for teachers to assume leadership in making changes in their schools. Teachers know more about where needs lie and are often in a better position to organize programs for change.

Others commented:

“The name empowers us—gives us courage.”

“A teacher leader is like an adult cheerleader.”

Three students, on the other hand, had a different perspective: they viewed teacher leaders as collaborators, participatory rather than *driving* forces, in the school-reform process. As one student put it,

The teacher leader program represents an opportunity to serve as a proactive team in school improvement and reform. . . . Leadership capacity not only means developing leadership in one’s self, but it is developing collaborative leadership capacity in others.

Questions generated in class also represented a range of understandings and still-fuzzy notions about the role of teacher leaders.

About two weeks later, after research articles on teacher leadership were assigned and read, critiqued, and discussed in class, candidates were asked to brainstorm and free-write descriptors of what makes teacher leaders. The most striking finding was that thirteen of the nineteen candidates now viewed teacher leaders as effective communicators who work collaboratively with others in teams.

At the end of the semester, candidates were asked to write what they had learned about the concept of teacher leaders. After five weeks of classes, candidates maintained the newer view of teacher leaders as collaborators rather than reverting to notions of top-down leadership models. Most candidates wrote that they needed to keep current as learners. They focused more on students in classrooms, as well as on the idea that they, the teacher-leader candidates, had a role in getting other voices in their school settings heard. Among the qualities listed at the end of the course were:

- willingness to serve on and lead teams to improve curriculum, assessment, and school management
- positive attitudes and encouragement of others
- passion for learning evidenced in the teachers’ willingness to be lifelong learners, not just to teach others
- focus on empowering student success and achievement
- willingness to work collaboratively with others
- willingness to take risks in order to assist school partnerships (with school staff, families, and community members) to function effectively and efficiently
- recognition that leadership capacity can be developed in everyone

Simply put by one Teacher Leader candidate, “Teacher leaders are willing to share leadership with others.”

Future Directions

Anecdotal and written feedback from students and faculty who teach in the U.M. Teacher Leader program identified the following strengths of the program:

- The commitment and dedication of the teacher-leader candidates
- The relevance of course content to school improvement

- The sophistication of teacher leader projects and research
- The emerging linkage between course activities and real problems and issues in the teacher leaders' schools
- The strong bond of support and collegiality established in the cohort group

As with any new program, we are continually analyzing and discussing possible adjustments to increase its effectiveness. We are continuing to clarify our conceptual framework and to align our program with it as it evolves.

Faculty members and cohort participants have identified the following areas for program improvement:

- Changing the sequence of courses may improve program continuity.
- Course projects should be more effectively coordinated and integrated across courses throughout programs.
- The size of the Teacher Leader cohort makes it difficult to consult individually with students, particularly in the action research sequence.

There are more issues than we anticipated regarding implementation of the action research projects. For example, a number of students have encountered resistance from other faculty at their schools toward collaborative planning and data collection, or a reluctance to do more work. We are realizing how to better prepare our teacher leaders earlier in the program (i.e., the course on leadership) to deal with issues such as these that they may face.

A special challenge is faced by some of the teachers (in the first cohort, four of nineteen) who change jobs after their first year in the program. They fear being perceived as "new kids on the block," coming in as leaders to change the schools. In these cases, needs assessments are recommended for the action research projects in order to (a) help teachers learn more about the climate in their new schools and (b) gather extensive data before determining specific needs or practices to be addressed by improvement plans. Such reconnaissance can help teacher leaders be more effective, in the long run, in future collaborative efforts with faculty, staff, administration, and parents at their schools.

We are also realizing that the action research studies must be designed to fit the time constraints imposed by program structure and that

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students need an orientation to action research and qualitative research at the beginning of the program. This preparation gives them more time to generate, clarify, and explore possible topics for their action research studies. We are very interested in how the first cohort, who are to complete the program this summer, implements the action research study.

Program graduates should return to their schools as teachers—and as leaders—prepared to strengthen relationships within their communities and promote quality changes in their schools. The overall response to the program so far has been overwhelmingly positive; however, the degree to which these teachers provide ongoing leadership in the continuous spiral of collaborative action research for school improvement, long after they complete this program, will be the ultimate measure of program success.

Notes

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