Preparing Superintendents for Building Teacher Leadership: Implications for University Programs[*]

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Abstract

This conceptual paper integrates the literature from several research bases: teacher leadership, the superintendency, and university preparation of superintendents. Currently little information exists in the literature relative to the involvement of the superintendent in promoting teacher leadership programs. This paper concludes with suggestions for how university professors can best meet the needs for training superintendents for these transformative roles.

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2 Introduction

Teacher leadership as a vehicle for implementing school reform requires a commitment from all members of the school community. Angelle, 2007, p. 59

By means of introduction we are university professors who are former administrators in K-12 school systems, one who served as a high school principal and the other as high school principal who later served as a superintendent. We have been passionately interested in the field of teacher leadership and believe that teachers are the *answer to*, not the *problem of*, the issues that concern and challenge schools. Our assertions are based on our practical experience, the belief in the strength and wisdom that teachers bring to the profession, and the burgeoning evidence from the research base on teacher leadership (Beachum & Denwith, 2004; Birky, Shelton, & Headley 2006, Gadja & Koliba, 2008; Lambert, 2003; Moller, Childs-Brown, Scrivner, 2001;Phelps, 2008; Quinn, Haggert, & Nolan, 2006; Scribner, 2007; Silva, Gimbert & Nolan, 2000; Smylie & Denny, 1990; Snell & Swanson, 2000; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

The literature reveals a new sense of professionalism that has been conceptualized in teacher leadership that is built on a foundation of mutual trust, recognition, empowerment, and support (Mujis & Harris, 2003, p.444). Further, the research base for teacher leadership defines several roles of teacher leaders that are essential components of meaningful school reform (Reeves, 2008; York-Barr, 2004). Pounder (2006) suggested that a possible fourth wave of teacher leadership is likely if teachers are viewed as transformational leaders in their schools, embracing both classroom and university contexts (p.533). Changes of this magnitude require a fundamental re-examination and alignment of all aspects of the system. It is the responsibility of the superintendent to lead and facilitate such a system transformation.

University programs, including those intended to prepare future superintendents have come under considerable scrutiny, attacked for their lack of relevance and rigor (Levine, 2005; Murphy, 2007). Armed with the conviction that we do not to contribute to 'more of the same' kinds of criticism, we offer alternative views of university curricula and approaches to teaching. We conclude this paper with suggestions that can inform professors to more effectively prepare superintendents to embrace the concepts of shared leadership and create systems that unite rather than separate faculty and administrators. We maintain that systems thinking is a key element in creating districts where leadership is shared and cultures are dynamic and interconnected.

This paper proposes a deeper look at three concepts, all of which intersect in interesting ways, for purposes of integrating and extending the knowledge base. First, teacher leadership is a respected concept in educational research; that research base affirms the strengths and wisdom that teachers bring to the table to improve education. Second, is the literature on systems thinking, which provides a conceptual backdrop for the understanding of how the whole system works, or doesn't work. Systems thinking allows educators to look at the interrelatedness of issues, as opposed to seeing them in their discrete parts. And third, are the issues of university preparation and the importance of programs that train educational leaders to understand and promote teacher leadership. All three of these concepts are analyzed and integrated with the work of the district superintendent, who has considerable opportunity for creating the culture that advances teacher leadership programs and developing a system that supports such programs.

We have learned through direct observation and research that teacher leadership is all about *influence*, so we look at the world of influence that universities have that promotes quality training in leadership, the influence that superintendents have in building capacity of all leaders in the district, and the ways that systems thinking can influence the culture of the school districts. But first, a review of teacher leadership, what it means, and how it is manifested in the schools.

3 Teacher Leadership

The field of teacher leadership is now more than a decade old (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2000, Silva, Gimbert & Nolan, 2000) and the interest continues to gain momentum in university and district programs. Besides classroom instruction, teachers play a variety of roles and functions in their districts, with principals typically facilitating the leadership growth of teachers (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). However, while the field continues to

grow, the definition of just what constitutes 'teacher leadership' remains somewhat elusive, with a variety of meanings. York-Barr and Duke reported their findings from two decades of research about teacher leadership and concluded that there are different conceptions of what teacher leadership includes that are basically grouped according to what it is that teacher leaders do in their schools, acknowledging that roles have changed as school needs have changed. They stated, "Ways of thinking about teacher leadership have evolved over time" (p.260). In truth, teachers have always had some form of leadership in schools, be they formal or informal. York-Barr and Duke concluded,

After reflecting on the literature as a whole, we suggest that teacher leadership is the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement. Such leadership work involves three intentional development foci: Individual development, collaboration or team development, and organizational development. (pp.287-288)

The development and influence that York-Barr and Duke described results in personal and organizational change. Teacher leaders change their habits of interaction as they begin to collaborate in new and expanded ways; they also learn new patterns of interaction with their principals, which can be smooth or difficult. Tensions often emerge between what the teacher leaders want to accomplish and what their administrators feel should occur (Smylie & Denny, 1990). The acceptance of teachers as leaders is difficult for some principals (Angelle, 2007; Moller, Childs-Brown, & Scrivner, 2001; Lambert, 2003). New roles and responsibilities need to be negotiated as teachers function in new leadership roles.

Teacher leaders often define their roles as being supportive of other teachers in their buildings, work that is done informally through collaboration (Moller, Childs-Bowen, & Scrivner, 2001; Wasley, 1989). Teachers who function as leaders are part of the change efforts in the school, so the supportive elements may include a push for change in teaching methods, the structure that involves collaboration, or other work that may evoke some support while being primarily transformative. Teachers' relationships with peers are a delicate balancing act in that they do not want to alienate themselves from their colleagues while they push or suggest change (Smylie & Denny, 1990). Frustrations can emerge as the people within the system adjust to a new way of interacting, with new behaviors and actions that challenge the assumptions that people had about their roles, the habits and traditions of the school, and the mental models of thinking that have sustained the system.

Teachers who function as leaders navigate the social context of their world that is known for its autonomy and privacy (Lortie, 1975). As teachers begin to have increased and different forms of collaboration with peers, there are additional skills that become increasingly important; these skills deal with the building of relationships and negotiation of ideas. Teacher leaders have to adjust to the ambiguities of their new roles and the related tensions of the new interactions with peers and administrators (Smylie & Denny, 1990). The relationships comprise the social network and the leadership is developed as a result of those relationships (Ogawa & Bossert, 1995).

York-Barr & Duke (2004) related the three conditions that influence teacher leadership as: school culture, roles and relationships, and structure. These three areas can also be understood by a systems analysis because they are interconnected and they relate to the whole of the school or school system. As teachers lessen their isolation and begin to work collaboratively, they change the culture of the school. Collaboration, with appropriate expectations, can be powerfully positive; it can also be powerfully negative without the right structure (Fullan, 2001). Snell and Swanson (2000) reported that teacher leaders felt that their collaboration was helped most by the professional development activities with peers, and that their leadership roles provided them with second strongest influence on their collaboration skills. The structural activities create possibilities for teacher leadership. Increasingly, collaboration is viewed for its importance in creating professional learning communities in which teachers break the patterns of isolation that they usually feel in school (Hord, 2004; Lieberman, 2000).

Administrators play an important part in creating the vision that sets the expectations for growth while supporting the teachers who are working as leaders in the school. The challenges in changing a culture cannot be overstated; this work is second-order change, resulting in a dramatic shift in the traditions of the school (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

The challenges inherent in second-order changes include the political issues where teachers assert new levels of knowledge and authority with peers, work role and subsequent role identification, issues of shared leadership with principals and central office administrators, work related issues of the demands of teachers who are often dealing with incredible pressures for increased student performance with decreased resources. The challenges associated with teacher leadership appear to be as significant as the rallying calls for the teacher leadership programs themselves. York-Barr and Duke (2004) reported, "In this day of high account-ability, the need and potential for teacher leadership as well as the press for results, has probably never been greater" (p.290). Because teacher leaders work within a system that either supports or acts as a barrier to its success, the roles of administrators are important to review.

4 Systems Elements that Impact the Work of Teacher Leaders

The literature for teacher leadership clearly links the importance of the building principal in fostering the growth and opening possibilities that lead to teacher leadership. As such, they create the environments within the school that empower teachers (Angelle, 2007; Birky, Shelton, & Headley 2006). Because teachers' worlds have been isolating and private (Lortie, 1975), the structure and the culture of the school must be changed to help teachers develop as leaders (Silva, Gimbert, & Nolan, 2000). Principals who realize the gifts that teachers bring to the decision making of the school unleash a new and powerful resource of human capital (Moller, Childs-Brown, & Scrivner, 2001).

Patterson and Patterson (2004) reported, "School principals who value and support teachers in developing their skills recognize that school goals can only be accomplished with a committed cadre of teachers" (p.77). There is growing recognition of the vital role that teachers play in advancing the schools goals and the subsequent importance of the principal in advancing the professional growth of the teachers. We continue the discussion of the challenges of culture, politics, and relationships with the building principal and begin to integrate that with a look at the world of superintendents for the influence they can exert in either supporting or acting as a barrier to teacher leadership.

There are a few studies that speak to the importance of the superintendent with regard to encouraging building principals to develop skills in instructional leadership (Schlechty, 2002) and a few studies could be found that directly relate to the field of teacher leadership. There is little in the research about the role of the superintendent with regard to teacher leadership. Therefore, for purposes of this paper, we present some of the current findings about principals and the role of teacher leadership and then merge information about the roles of superintendents, extrapolating the issues that most relate to teacher leadership concepts. We begin with some issues that relate to principals.

As stated in this paper, principals are in the unique position of being closest in proximity to the roles of teachers, and subsequently closest to the option of granting teachers the opportunity to lead. It is the principals who first deal with the issues associated with the sharing of power in the school (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, & Hann, 2002; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Moller & Pankake, 2006). Principals are in positions to either distribute power and share authority or decline that partnership and remain in the ultimate seat of authority of the school.

As principals empower teachers, there is the reality that the work they are engaged in is beyond the redesign of work roles; the history of the school, its culture and the personal responses of people in the organization all combine to influence how they will be able to achieve their objectives (Smylie & Denny, 1990). Are principals prepared for these roles? Consider the quote from York-Barr and Duke (2004) who reported, "...while generally more supportive of the concept of teacher leadership, principals may lack the knowledge and experience required to effectively support higher levels of such leadership" (p.274).

What then about the superintendents who supervise the principals? It is difficult for principals to improve the quality of teacher collaboration without the support and guidance of the superintendent (Gadja & Koliba, 2008). Superintendents play a pivotal role in advising, nurturing, and supervising principals; they also create the vision for the district that can establish the environment that is most conducive to creating shared leadership opportunities. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) reported, "Superintendents and other staff in a school district can legitimize the efforts of developing teacher leadership by establishing appropriate

policy and district culture and by being advocates for teacher leadership" (p.15).

Superintendents working to improve schools have received convincing evidence to include teachers as decision makers in that process (Fullan, 2006; Hord, 2004; Lambert, 2003; Lieberman, 2000; Louis, Kruse, & Raywid, 1996). Despite the regularity with which shared decision making and teacher leadership appear in the literature, the assumption is that most superintendents have not been trained in how to develop teachers as leaders.

Fullan (2006) invites leaders to consider the benefits of shared leadership then he quotes the work of Henry Mintzberg, author of *Managers, Not MBAs*, "Leadership is not about making clever decisions... It is about energizing other people to make good decisions and do better things" (¶ 39). It is the superintendents who often provide the enthusiasm that energizes the people in their districts. Paul Houston (2007), AASA executive director, reported, "School districts are not islands in the stream, and superintendents are the only ones capable of anchoring the district to that mainland of their community" (¶ 30). Superintendents not only convey the importance of teacher leadership to the people in their school system, they communicate that information to the larger educational community as well.

When the world of the superintendents is reviewed, it reveals a complex mix of politics, finance, instructional leadership, and human resource planning that creates and sustains a work force dedicated to improving student learning. How do superintendents define their work? Ninety-eight percent of superintendents reported that they have a high-stress job and 93% indicated that their districts have experienced an enormous increase in responsibilities without getting the resources to meet them (Johnson, 2004). As the world of the superintendent deals with fragmentation, stress, and increasing demands, there is the question of priority, coupled with the reality of time constraints.

Superintendents are the culture shapers by their communication styles. Spanneut and Ford (2008) reported, "Whether by design or chance, superintendents communicate their beliefs about what it important educationally and the roles they expect their principals to fulfill" (p.28). Increasingly, superintendents are drawn into four traditional conceptualizations: superintendent as teacher of teachers, as manager, as statesman, or as applied social scientist (Kowalski, 2005). Superintendents influence building principals to be instructional leaders when they focus on those skills themselves (Spanneut & Ford, 2008).

According to Senge (1990), systems theory studies the organization as a whole, with special consideration of the interrelationships among its parts as well as its relationship with the external environment. It is the superintendent's responsibility to respond in an adaptive way to cope with changes in the environment by aligning the system to meet identified needs. In doing so, the superintendent assumes the role of "sensemaker" (Weick, 1995). The superintendent can utilize sensemaking to lead the group from a collection of individuals toward consensus. Certainly the superintendent as sensemaker can align the entire system to nurture and support the development of teacher leadership. How can superintendents be prepared to assist in this sensemaking?

5 University Preparation of School Leaders

The preparation of educational leaders has come under considerable scrutiny in the past years (Levine, 2005; Murphy, 2007). Murphy reported after working with colleagues from more than 60 university and non-university programs who were working to strengthen the degree programs in school administration, "What universities have been doing to prepare educational leaders is, at best, of questionable value, and at worst, harmful" (p.582).

Murphy argues that the coursework in university preparation programs does not meet the needs that practitioners have in the actual job setting. He examined curricula for its relevance, noting that many of the assignments for scholarly writing are not a match for the practitioners' needs for writing in the day-to-day world of schools. He further argued that assignments should have less theory that typically mirrors the world of the professors, and more "...*just intime* knowledge in the service of addressing authentic problems of practice" (p.583). The authentic world of the practitioner raises questions that are grounded in the day-to-day issues and problems in the school for which problem solving and experience matter a great deal. Murphy summarized as follows,

The university culture honors questioning, complexifying, and creating divergence; the work of school leaders is complex and confusing and often laced with turbulence. The touchstones of acting school administrators are parsimonious models and answers, perspectives that enjoy little credibility in university-based departments of school administration. (p.585)

Rather than decline from telling the 'war stories' from the field, professors in university-based programs can use personal narratives, case problems, and authentic simulations to provide for relevance and problem solving in the arenas with which they will be placed. When Murphy referred to parsimony in models and answers, he honored that fragmentation and brevity that illustrate an administrator's world; administrators need to quickly address the issues that are always emerging, essential, and demanding.

Levine's work resulted in several suggestions for university professors to consider. The top four resources that were revealed from an alumni survey of administrators specified that they wanted "faculty that had experience as practitioners, more relevant curriculum, upgraded technology, and a curriculum with more clinical experience" (2005, p. 39). Many of the issues that were identified by Levine were echoed by Murphy, particularly in the creation of practical curricula that would serve the practitioners with relevance and rigor.

The emergence of teacher leadership graduate programs affords an opportunity to consider the deficiencies of educational leadership programs. Professors who are developing curricula to include teacher leadership concepts in their educational leadership programs can avoid the complaints and concerns related by Levine (2005) and Murphy (2007) when they purposefully build a program that is uniquely responsive to the issues that confront teacher leaders in their professional environment.

So, if we return to the pattern of our logic, with teacher leadership being important, superintendents being important to the cultivation of teacher leadership, we ask about the preparation of superintendents for these roles. We ask the obvious question: *are the professors in university educational leadership programs teaching the skills superintendents who will be creating and sustaining those changes need?*

6 Implications for University Programs

Heifetz (2006) framed the essence of the challenges for school executive leaders when he said,

School superintendents may have the hardest government jobs in America. They must lead and get results in an intensely political environment. Yet without specific preparation for leadership, those who rise through the education system may lack the skills needed to succeed. (p.512)

He described the challenges that universities face in preparing leaders for such important roles, specifying that case studies offer powerful learning examples for educational leaders. Hess (2006) agreed and added that internships, diverse approaches to management, and the utilization of professors with a wide range of experience and backgrounds can make the difference in creating a quality university preparation.

While there are numerous reports that review the efficacy of school leadership programs (Bradshaw, Perreault, McDowelle, & Bell, 1997; Elmore, 2006; Heifetz, 2006; Hess, 2006; Orr, 2006a, 2006b; Stein, S. J., 2006; Teitel, 2006;), we have decided to present two different approaches that have been presented in the literature. We will attempt to form a linkage with how these approaches relate to teacher leadership programs and subsequent needs of superintendents who are leading the same.

Our suggestions for the university-based programs for superintendents who will be leading teacher leadership programs are based on the literature, our experience in the field, and the results of our studies. We present them below:

- University programs can create internships for aspiring administrators, asking them to practice leading efforts for teacher leadership programs. Professors can ask practicing superintendents to create actual teacher leadership programs in their schools as an authentic, job-embedded assignment in leadership. Students of these programs can write the analyses of their assignments and present them in their classes, with the expectation that all cases deal with the expressed improved of teacher learning and leading for improved student achievement.
- University programs can create action research programs that ask for aspiring and practicing superintendents to analyze authentic learning problems in the district and devise plans to improve teaching for the purpose of improving student achievement.

- Partnerships with the university and other school districts allow for authentic, task-specific work that enhances teacher leadership; professors can develop these partnerships with the larger educational community.
- University programs can be exemplars of this process by modeling these practices and embedding the assignments for program evaluation in their courses, along with measure that build critical inquiry about the day-to-day decision making of superintendents.
- University programs that place a priority on assessing learning results, best educational practice, programs evaluation, and development of teacher leadership programs support the notion that student achievement is the foundation for everything we do in education.
- Universities can be the source for uniting the internal and external programs that advance teacher leadership while providing training for aspiring and practicing superintendents. Professors can help write the programs that unite theory with practice, and they can create the unique partnerships that create professional learning communities that serve multiple constituencies.
- University course expectations can set standards for graduate students that are rigorous and meaningful. Professors can collaboratively review their expectations for courses and compare them with institutions across the United States, and the continuous feedback from the graduates of university programs. The work of teacher leadership is the perfect example of praxis, where theory guides but does not constrain action. Aspiring and practicing superintendents can use authentic cases from their districts to create new approaches for leadership.
- University professors can create the experiences that allow graduate students to work directly in the field, solving complex problems, providing professional development activities that result in teacher leadership opportunities. University coursework can also demand the analysis of planned change in the district so that graduate students continually apply the concepts learned in class.

7 Conclusions and Recommendations

The concepts of teacher leadership are about empowering teachers to develop their professionalism to improve learning for students and influence peers, the system, and ultimately, their professional lives. None of this happens in isolation; everything happens within a system. We began this paper with some fundamental questions about what teacher leadership includes, how superintendents are involved, and how the system is changed within the district and within the university to support these changes. As such, the importance of systems thinking takes on increased importance in understanding how these changes can occur.

As superintendents work to create systems that decentralize decision making, it is important to concentrate on guiding ideas; the theory, methods, and tools; and the innovations in infrastructure to support teacher leadership. When we look at the district as a school system, instead of a system of schools, we can see how all the efforts are interconnected; it is no longer acceptable to allow for the isolation that exists in most schools, where there is a ceiling effect with what people learn (Fullan, 2001). We conclude with the logic we have been following in this paper: teacher leaders show the greatest promise for the important work that needs to be done with changing schools; superintendents are the leaders for this vision to occur; and universities have a fundamental role in the training of all leaders for these transformative roles.

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