PEER? EXPERT?

TEACHER LEADERS STRUGGLE TO GAIN TRUST WHILE ESTABLISHING THEIR EXPERTISE

By Melinda Mangin and Sara Ray Stoelinga

Instructional teacher leaders strive to help teachers build knowledge and skills to improve teaching practice. With titles such as coach or coordinator, they may receive a stipend or released time from teaching. Instructional teacher leaders rely on an array of strategies to improve instruction and enhance student learning. They conduct professional development workshops, co-plan and model lessons, observe teaching and provide feedback, collect and analyze data, facilitate dialogue and reflective critique, and promote shared practices among teachers.

Despite the designation as leader, the instructional teacher leader's role is nonsupervisory. Teacher leaders do not evaluate teachers to determine performance-based promotions or sanctions. By maintaining their status as peers rather than supervisors, teacher leaders gain teachers' trust. The logic follows that teachers who trust the teacher leader will seek advice and assistance.

The nonsupervisory nature of the teacher leader role creates a paradoxical challenge for the teacher leader. In an effort to gain teachers' trust, teacher leaders de-emphasize their status as experts and avoid delivering hard feedback about teaching practice. Yet these actions ultimately undermine the work of improving instruction. How can the teacher leader be both a trusted colleague and a resource for instructional improvement?

Making teacher leadership an effective

tool for improving instructional practice depends on resolving this paradox. It requires a reconceptualization of the role, placing the teacher leader's expert knowledge at the center of the work. It also requires a school culture that embraces evaluation, collaboration, dialogue, and deprivatization as vital to the instructional improvement process.

PEER OR EXPERT?

To influence teaching practice, the instructional teacher leader must first establish trusting relationships with teachers. This becomes problematic, however, when teacher leaders downplay their expertise to maintain an identity as a trusted peer. De-emphasizing their expert status enables teacher leaders to comply with the norms of egalitarianism that characterize the teaching profession. Lortie (2002) explains that teachers view one another as equals except for differences in seniority and education. This egalitarian spirit is evident, for example, in teachers' rejection of pay-for-performance reforms, which seek to differentiate teachers based on student learning outcomes.

Teacher leaders often adhere to this professional norm of egalitarianism, casting themselves as co-learners, rather than experts. In a study of teacher leaders, one math coordinator stated: "The staff understands that I'm not the be-all and end-all. I do the best I can. I take recommendations. I have days where I do something great (and) I have days where I don't; we talk about it" (Mangin, 2005, p. 470). This math teacher leader hoped to gain teachers' trust by downplaying his expertise. This is a common strategy used by instructional teacher leaders who draw on their peer status to gain and preserve teachers' trust and acceptance.

Ironically, the teacher leader's reluctance to cast herself as an expert can undermine others' perceptions of her ability to serve as a resource. If teachers view the teacher leader as lacking expert knowledge, there is little incentive to seek the teacher leader's advice or guidance (Mangin, 2005). While it may be true that teacher leaders are learning with and from teachers, their role as teacher leader presupposes some advanced capacity to guide teachers in the learning process. By describing themselves as nonexperts, teacher leaders unintentionally devalue their work and become a less desirable resource. As a result, the peer relationship on which teacher leadership is predicated can hinder instructional improvement. This doesn't mean that teacher leaders should reject the peer aspect of their work. Rather, what it means to be a peer must be redefined.

HARD FEEDBACK

When instructional teacher leaders emphasize their peer status, they also limit their opportunity to provide hard feedback to teachers. Educational researchers Brian Lord, Kate Cress, and Barbara Miller (2008) describe hard feedback as crucial to instructional improvement. They explain: "By *hard feedback,* we refer to instances where a teacher leader's honest critique of classroom practice is issued even though the critique actively challenges the teacher's preferred practice and may lead the teacher to experience some level of professional discomfort" (p. 57). Hard feedback is necessary to facilitate deep and sustainable changes in teachers' practice. While hard feedback may be integral to the improvement process, it threatens

PRIVATE PRACTICE

In *Schoolteacher* (1975), sociologist Daniel Lortie examines the norms and culture of the teaching profession. The book remains surprisingly relevant. Lortie describes the teaching profession as having unclear routines and inadequate ways to measure performance. Uncertain about how to understand their impact or effectiveness, teachers resort to a set of individualized instructional approaches shrouded in incoherent goals. As such, Lortie characterizes teaching as an isolated profession, in which teachers develop and enact their practice privately.
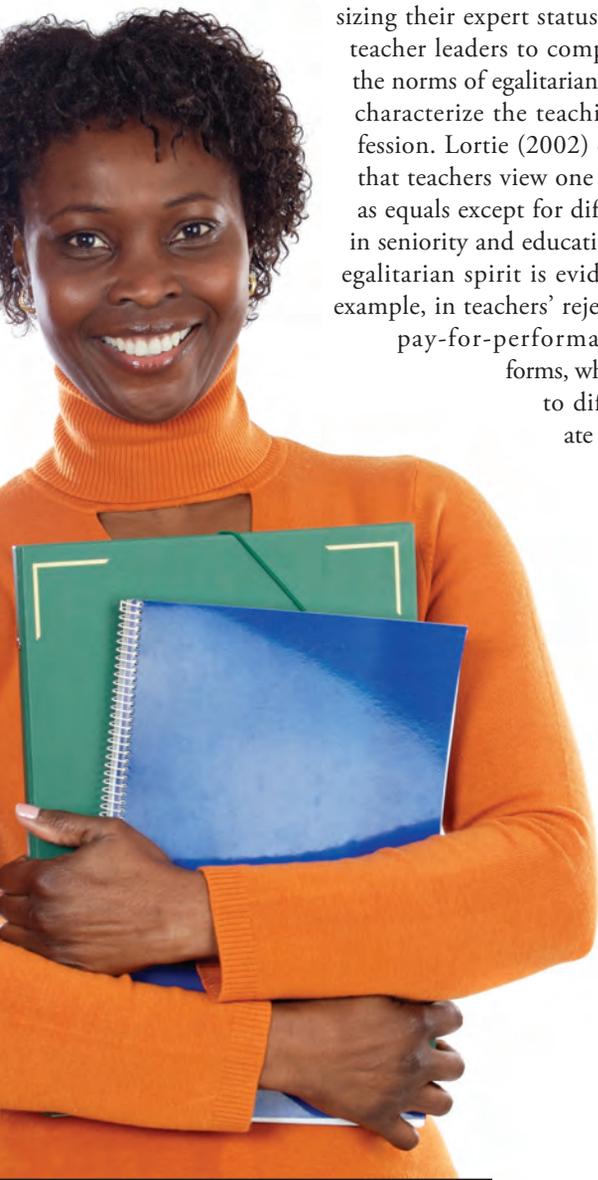
the teacher leader's status as peer, breaking with norms of egalitarianism, autonomy, and privacy.

As a result, rather than digging deeply into instructional practice in the classroom, instructional teacher leaders are more likely to provide assistance to teachers at a more superficial level. In her study of math teacher leaders, Mangin (2005) found that teacher leaders commonly provided "nonintrusive assistance — aimed more at helping teachers than changing their instruction" (p.470). These nonintrusive interactions, such as providing materials and resources, allowed teacher leaders to appear helpful and encouraging without being critical of teachers' instructional practice. While teacher leaders often describe such strategies as laying the foundation for delivering hard feedback, they are often unable to transform their role to include constructive criticism.

Transforming the teacher leader role to include hard feedback for teachers may be especially difficult because teacher leaders often lack experience providing feedback. Lord and colleagues (2008) explain: "In their prior work as classroom teachers, teacher leaders were unlikely to have observed or participated in giving hard feedback to other teachers or to have received hard feedback themselves. Therefore, they had little to turn to in the way of experience and little to alleviate the reticence they felt at playing such an untried and potentially uninvited role" (p. 69).

Teacher leaders' experiences as classroom teachers do not prepare them to engage in the critical conversations about instruction necessary to promote improvements in teaching. Not only do teacher leaders avoid giving hard feedback in an effort to preserve peer status, they generally lack effective strategies to do so.

CREATE THE CONDITIONS

The success of instructional teacher leaders depends on establishing trusting relationships with teachers. To build trust, the teacher leader positions herself as a peer, unwittingly undermining her own authority to deliver hard feedback, which is key to instructional improvement. To create the conditions for effective instructional teacher leadership we must address this paradox directly and redefine 1) peer relationships, 2) the improvement process, and 3) norms of teaching.

PEER RELATIONSHIPS

Foremost, we need to redefine peer relationships. Despite cultural norms of egalitarianism, teachers are aware of variations in teachers' instructional expertise. In his study of leadership in high schools, Jonathan Supovitz (2008) found that teachers sought advice from colleagues whom they perceived as having expertise in specific domains. While the egalitarian norms of teaching discourage teachers from identifying differences in colleagues' expertise, teachers seek assistance based on perceived variations in knowledge and skill.

Peer relationships must be reconceptualized to make room for teachers to lead in areas where they have strengths. This means acknowledging teachers' areas of expertise and utilizing teachers as leaders in instructional improvement. As such, formal structures must be put in place in schools to allow a broad base of classroom teachers to lead professional development, provide advice to peers, and share aspects of their practice that are exemplary. Similarly, it means positioning formal teacher leaders as experts with valuable knowledge to be shared.

IMPROVEMENT PROCESS

Just as the relationships must change, so must the conversations. We must redefine the improvement process to include challenging but meaningful conversations about instruction, making nonpunitive collegial critique an accepted and expected part of teaching practice. Conversations intended to assess and address student and teacher learning needs should be a common component of teachers' interaction. While such conversations are inherently evaluative in nature, they should also be free from stigma, presenting all teachers with an opportunity to learn with and from one another. Creating structures, tools, and procedures for such conversations to become the norm is critical to effective instructional teacher leadership and improved instructional practice.

Importantly, difficult conversations will not take place if teacher leaders and teachers don't know how to have them. Instructional teacher leaders need training that will prepare them to ask deep questions and critique instructional practice in respectful yet meaningful ways. A recent study revealed that effectively asking meaningful questions of students is among the most challenging aspects of instructional practice for teachers. Principals similarly struggle to ask deep questions in their conversations with teachers about their instruction (Sartain & Stoelinga, 2011). Teachers, principals, and teacher leaders all need to learn how to ask critical questions that promote reflective thinking and discussion to improve practice.

NORMS OF TEACHING

Finally, changing peer relationships and promoting instructional improvement are contingent on transforming the cultural

---

PRACTICAL INSIGHTS ON TEACHER LEADERSHIP

Effectively employing teacher leaders to improve instruction is not always as intuitive as it seems. In *Examining Effective Teacher Leadership: A Case Study Approach* (Teachers College Press, 2010), Stoelinga and Mangin offer practical insights into the challenges that teacher leaders face and effective means for addressing those challenges. The accompanying teaching notes promote the self-reflection and critical thinking necessary to improve the practice of teacher leadership.

context of schools. Foremost, schools must foster professional norms of collaboration, dialogue, and deprivatized practice. Joint work, built on expert knowledge and marked by interdependence, can change the long-standing culture of teacher autonomy and isolation. In turn, reduced autonomy and isolation encourages joint work (Little, 1990).

 Inevitably, joint work requires trust. Bryk and Schneider (2003) explain that social trust is built on mutual dependencies focused on achieving shared goals. Deep social trust among teachers, parents, and students improves schools. As such, effective teacher leadership depends on building trust around the joint work of improving instructional practice. This stands in contrast to building trust by emphasizing egalitarianism and avoiding difficult conversations about practice. Schools must become places where the norms of teaching reflect an expectation that peers have the capacity and ability to engage in the joint work of effectively critiquing one another's instructional practice.

Challenging long-standing norms requires intentionally changing the nature of schooling to include new structures, tools, and procedures that facilitate instructional critique. It involves modifying school schedules to make time for teachers to observe and learn from one another and providing time to conduct pre- and post-observation conferences. It means developing new methods of observation such as videotaping and analyzing instructional practice in grade-level groups, applying rubrics to guide instructional critique, and developing templates with possible questions to pose following an observation.

In short, addressing the teacher leader paradox depends on changing schools. Far from a stand-alone reform, effective instructional teacher leadership depends on facilitating norms that open classroom doors, deprivatize practice, and foster instructional improvement. In redefining the peer relationship and establishing pathways for teacher leaders to be both trusted peers and instructional experts, we stand not only to deepen the work of teacher leaders, but also to improve schools.

REFERENCES

Bryk, A. & Schneider, B. (2003, March). Trust in schools: A core resource for school reform. *Educational Leadership, 60*(6), 40-44.

Little, J.W. (1990, Summer). The persistence of privacy: Autonomy and initiative in teachers' professional relations. *Teachers College Record, 91*, 509-536.

Lord, B., Cress, K., & Miller, B. (2008). Teacher leadership in support of large-scale mathematics and science education reform. In M.M. Mangin & S.R. Stoelinga (Eds.), *Effective teacher leadership: Using research to inform and reform.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Lortie, D.C. (2002). *Schoolteacher: A sociological study* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mangin, M.M. (2005, July). Distributed leadership and the culture of schools: Teacher leaders' strategies for gaining access to classrooms. *Journal of School Leadership, 15*(4), 456-484.

Sartain, L. & Stoelinga, S. (2011). *Rethinking teacher evaluation: The Chicago Excellence in Teaching Pilot.* Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research.

Supovitz, J.A. (2008). Instructional influence in American high schools. In M.M. Mangin & S.R. Stoelinga (Eds.), *Effective teacher leadership: Using research to inform and reform.* New York: Teachers College Press.

•

Melinda Mangin (mmangin@msu.edu) is assistant professor of education leadership at Rutgers. Sara Ray Stoelinga (srstoelinga@uchicago.edu) is senior director at the Urban Education Institute and associate clinical professor with the Committee on Education at the University of Chicago. ■

---

versations to assess teachers' perceptions of how well the team engaged in rigorous collaborative discourse and how comfortable team members felt moving beyond the culture of nice.

TIME AND COURAGE

Teacher leaders who set goals, norms, and use protocols with their teams but skirt around the culture of nice will never achieve rigorous collaborative discourse. It takes skill to recognize the signs of a dysfunctional culture and courage to respond in ways that will lead to incremental shifts in thinking and behavior. Not every team member will shift at the same time, but every time a team leader experiences a moment of discomfort or uncertainty, that leader can be assured that he or she is shifting culture.

REFERENCES

Lencioni, P. (2002). *The five dysfunctions of a team: A leadership fable.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Stone, D., Patton, B., & Heen, S. (1999). *Difficult conversations: How to discuss what matters most.* New York: Penguin Books.

•

Elisa MacDonald (elisamacdonald@gmail.com) of Arlington, Mass., is a consultant with Teachers21, a nonprofit organization working to build educator effectiveness. ■