

TEACHER LEADERS CREATE THEIR OWN JOBS

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“All teachers can lead,” argued school leadership expert Roland

Barth (2001), and we need their leadership if we’re going to meet the needs of all students. Schools have become complex organizations that require diverse areas of expertise, and leveraging teachers’ strengths into new roles is critical for school improvement.

But are schools and teachers prepared to take on these changes? Fostering teachers to become school leaders requires teachers to develop a new set of skills as well as changes in existing patterns of leadership and school culture (Wenner & Campbell, 2017).

Colleges of education can play a key role in advancing teacher leaders’ practice in schools by integrating teacher leadership into existing programs of educational leadership or administration. However, they must get beyond their current practices of



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focusing teaching on leadership theories to prepare and support teacher leaders as they navigate their way to a new status in schools and districts.

Since 2008, the faculty at Penn State has wrestled with how to address teacher leadership preparation within existing programs that focus on leadership and administration. Very little has been written about teacher leadership programs. Wenner and Campbell (2017) identified only two published studies to draw on in the literature.

Our educational leadership program developed and implemented an emphasis for teacher leadership within our master of education program (30 credits). We also provide a teacher leader certificate program (12 credits) that leads to endorsement from the Pennsylvania Department of Education for teacher leader practice.

These online programs, offered in collaboration with Penn State World Campus, are organized around a core of inquiry. In managing and revising the program, our faculty drew extensively on the experience we gained from working with teachers in the field.

We recognize teachers as instructional experts with strong interests in improving teaching and learning. Further, we recognize that the principal, with unmanageable amounts of responsibility, cannot serve instructional leadership as just one person (Sebastian et al., 2018).

Inquiry is a way for teachers to contribute to the ongoing continual improvement of instruction (Smylie et al., 2002). Throughout the program, we ask our students, all of whom are active teachers or other working professionals, to engage in reflections about their learning and how it supports — or doesn't support — their future goals.

In our university's work with aspiring teacher leaders over the last decade, two core strategies have emerged that hold significant promise for fostering teacher leadership: 1) provide teachers with the skills they need to create their own jobs, and 2) provide training and extended (e.g. post-graduate) support in developing ongoing professional learning and online communities of practice.

To inform continual improvement of our teacher leadership program, we surveyed 48 program graduates, asking them to reflect on their experiences. We also asked about the perceived value of their program, their future goals/employment, and any obstacles they expected to face in seeking a professional role as a teacher leader.

We used thematic analysis to analyze the open-ended responses from survey data. We measured demographic and nominal data from those same 48 survey responses to inform understanding of narrative responses. We further analyzed these data to evaluate this teacher leadership program for better preparing teacher leaders for practice.

Findings revealed that teacher leader goals are unique and distinct from goals typical of other educational leaders in that teacher leaders wish to contribute leadership without leaving their primary role as a classroom teacher.

TEACHER LEADERSHIP GOALS

As our surveys revealed, most teachers in our program wish to expand on their current teaching capacity without formally moving into administration. This aligns with standard academic theories of teacher leadership that emphasize the core identity of teaching in the classroom — i.e. a leader among peers (Poekert et al., 2016; Smylie & Denny, 1990). Most

teachers in our survey indicated they would like to retain a connection to teaching while supporting instructional leadership (typically carried out by administrators) in the school or district.

However, realities of the occupational structure of public K-12 schools channel teachers into administration. Our respondents indicate that, to take on a leadership role, they have to either chose administration or forge their own unique position.

By preparing teachers leaders with the knowledge and skills to offer instructional leadership in schools or districts, our program encourages capacity building for these roles. Teachers will need to be advocates for teacher leadership if they are to create alternatives to traditional administrative roles for instructional leadership within schools.

Reflections from teachers who came from private schools, including international ones, further suggest that this dilemma facing public school teachers does not have to be the case. Teachers in private or non-U.S. schools often had a clear career path that allowed them to assume more formal administrative-type work while retaining teaching duties.

They did not appear to see the same tensions as teachers in the public system. For some, their school already had a recognized role as head teacher (i.e. a teacher responsible for leadership or management within the school, which may be considered synonymous with teacher leader).

As one student said: "I am now a head teacher in my building. I'd like to continue to be a person that is looked to for leadership skills but would like to remain in my current teaching position."

This position of head teacher wasn't an option for most graduates who worked in public schools. They talked about either the kind of position they could obtain in the current structure or the need to create their own position. Many were looking to their coursework for knowledge and skills that could help them build their own new roles.

Many also wished to move on to higher education to earn a doctorate, teach at the college level, or conduct research. It is notable that most graduates had multiple goals, yet the field's ideas about teacher leadership are often limited, lacking a theory or vision about how teachers can become thought leaders or teacher educators.

University programs need to prepare graduates with skills that can support and sustain their multifaceted long-term professional goals. This includes the ability to craft new roles that have not previously been the norm for teachers and teacher leaders.

WHAT SKILLS DO TEACHER LEADERS NEED?

Leadership, as a general concept, requires developing significant skill sets. We believe all teachers can and do lead, but to do this, our graduates said they needed new skills.

First, teacher leaders need to have the communication and political skills necessary to mobilize action among peers. Additionally, they need the research and writing skills that can promote their expertise as leaders in the fields of instructional practice.

Further, they need to be skilled in the practices of instructional leadership, including supervision, program evaluation, planned change for improvement, and professional learning. The sections that follow demonstrate findings from our surveys and explain how these data informed our program's development.

Communication for collaboration

Our surveys showed that communication among peers is a central skill that teacher leaders must

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develop, and graduates appreciated the program's focus in this area. One participant noted the program had "given me some ideas on how to go about fighting for my school and my staff as a teacher leader," while another valued the ability to "foster collaboration among my colleagues."

With its origins in a cohort model, the online program retains a strong emphasis on promoting peer collaboration and building peer networks, but the faculty has grappled with how to promote communication and a sense of belonging in an online environment.

In the core courses, most lessons require students to participate in discussion forums. They begin with a prompt relevant to learning outcomes for a given lesson and require students to submit at least one original post to the prompt and at least two additional responses to original postings of other peers.

Students said engagement in the content and with one another, through discussion forums, was beneficial. "The continual conversation between the classmates was helpful. Each person was able to add new insight, which expanded my thinking," said one. Students also write blogs about the class material, which gives them practice in communicating with external audiences (e.g. parents or the school community).

Social media provides another means of communication and of initiating participation in online professional learning networks.

Collaboration in these networks can happen asynchronously, which may be managed flexibly and individually, and ultimately provide for increased effectiveness. Additionally, these networks connect teacher leaders with current research, which provides helpful resources for teachers engaged in inquiry for leadership.

Educators in our program recognized the importance of these strategies. One student noted, "The emphasis on collaboration has been especially useful and relevant. Although it is an important skill that we all realize, really talking about it and studying it was helpful."

Inquiry as compelling research

Our surveys also substantiated inquiry as central to teacher leadership. Many teachers who enter our program have done some kind of classroom inquiry, but, for most, this was their first experience in carrying out a long-term, multifaceted inquiry project.

One graduate noted: "Actually going through the steps of the final project has shown me what I need to do in the future with my classroom inquiry." Developing a careful, considered inquiry approach was seen as critical to future success, and teachers need to learn to "effectively and efficiently complete the inquiry cycle."

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One student wrote: "[I]mplementing an inquiry project and determining its validity and impact in my classroom was the most beneficial." Many graduates valued academic research and wanted to move beyond classroom inquiry. One student even noted: "My husband who just finished his Ph.D. work ... often commented on how he wished his master's program introduced him to the rigor of academic writing and research as we have been asked to do."

The inquiry that teacher leaders do also needs to be linked to the broader organizational or policy environment. Teacher leaders need to be able to use the results of inquiry to engage peers, convince administrators, and sway school boards.

STAFFING TEACHER LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS

Analysis of these data indicated a need for us, as a faculty, to consider comparisons between what our teacher leaders indicated they need and what we know our aspiring school and district leaders need from their respective academic programs.

Specifically, when considering the interaction between teacher leaders and administrators within courses, some faculty considered that these interactions provide a unique opportunity for teachers and principals to learn the perspectives of the other. This interaction is beneficial to all types of school leaders.

A few faculty, however, expressed concern that this mixed-role method of interactions would be inappropriate, as they viewed the role of administrator as the antithesis to the ethos of self-empowered teacher professionals.

Our experience suggests that teacher leaders and aspiring principals not only benefit from interaction, but often also need relevant skills development to make the most of this interaction. We know that principals need to be instructional leaders and are under pressure to provide more observations and feedback and facilitate more effective professional learning.

These trends suggest that we need to prepare teachers and principals to create hybrid teacher-administrator roles that enable a greater range of individuals and their expertise to move into leadership roles in schools.

We also recognize that aspiring teacher leaders need support after graduating. Teacher leaders could benefit from participation in online communities of practice or professional learning networks.

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But singlehandedly creating one's own professional networks and communities of practice is a daunting task, and it begs the question of whether universities should develop online platforms that can link alumni, faculty, and current students in larger online communities of practice. We continue to investigate how social media programs might be able to create these important links.

NEW LEADERS FOR NEW ROLES

As a developing field, teacher leadership makes connections with new fields — e.g. neuroscience (Conyers & Wilson, 2016) — and can be disruptive of traditional administrative or leadership instruction, creating more pathways than currently exist. We can improve academic programs for teacher leaders by recognizing the fluid nature of the field and the multiple goals teacher leaders have.

Clearly, inquiry, teacher collaboration, and team building are important skills. Looking to the future, teacher leaders will likely be required to act as entrepreneurs (Berry et al., 2013). Technological change, reoccurring political reform, and an ever-shifting global economy will place pressure on schools and teachers to continually innovate and adapt.

They will need to be continually learning and encouraging others to learn, and they will also need to be able to communicate why this learning is needed. All of these skills can help teacher leaders craft and succeed in diverse leadership roles, some of which have yet to be envisioned.

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