Leadership Reciprocity: The Mutual Influences of Teacher Leaders and Principals

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In this qualitative study of six schools noted for teacher leadership 28 respondents were interviewed. Teacher leadership often involved the mutual influence between teacher leaders and principals. These influences are discussed from the perspectives of each of the six schools, gender, seniority, and the status of the three types of respondents: teacher leader, teacher nominators and principal. Three models of the relationships between teacher leaders and principals discovered in the schools are developed.

INTRODUCTION

During the restructuring and reform of the late 1990’s in this school district there were two key forces at work. One was a school improvement process, which relied on more extensive shared decision-making with substantial teacher involvement. It changed the nature of the relationship between teachers and administrators because teacher leaders and principals assumed and created new roles needed to continue school operations. The second related to the reality of the workplace where teachers were facing significant challenges brought on as a result of declining enrolment, provincial reforms, losses in personnel, cutbacks in funding, and increasing demands for accountability.

This study took place in 6 rural schools (2 elementary, 2 high schools, and 2 all grade) in one Canadian school district. There were 28 respondents overall: 11 teachers as leaders (the two highest ranked as teacher leaders by school staff on a leadership screening instrument), 11 teachers as nominators of teacher leaders (non-teachers who also referred the teacher leaders in their ranking), and 6 principals.

A unique focus of this study was that formal teacher leadership positions, such as the department head were very few in these schools. In fact, among those nominated as teacher leaders (only two teacher leaders were also department heads). In the absence of formal teacher leadership positions the question of the relationship between administrators and teachers that often perform leadership roles as ‘teacher le-
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aders’ is less obvious. What was obvious was that teachers, leaders, and administrators were aware of the influence of teacher leaders in these schools. This is particularly true in an environment, which claims to be seeking more input from teachers and more shared decision making as part of school improvement initiatives.

In light of the above, I discuss the mutual influence of teacher leaders and administrators as ‘leadership reciprocity.’ First, some comments on the relationship between administrator (principals) and teacher leaders, while delving into influence administrators have on teacher leaders and also the influence teacher leaders have on administrators. This is then further portrayed with the development of three models of ‘leadership reciprocity,’ as they appear to exist in these schools. Lastly, I will conclude with a discussion some of the features of teacher leadership, as it exists in these 6 schools and transformational leadership.

TEACHER LEADERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

Wasley (1991) noted that many teachers when asked could not define teacher leadership. She discovered that teachers defined teacher leadership as ‘influencing and engaging colleagues toward improved practice’ (p. 21). Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (1997) take teacher leadership to mean of influence and direction setting. They argue that ‘variation in leadership concepts, types, or models can be accounted for by differences in who exerts influence, and its outcomes’ (p. 5). For the purposes of this study, I understand teacher leadership to be setting directions and influencing others in the school.

Whitaker (1995), in a study of effective middle school administrators, determined that these principals identified key teacher leaders and involved them in the decision-making process as well as use them in an informal manner. It is with this in mind that understanding the relationship between teacher leaders and principals seems of critical importance. To discuss ‘leadership reciprocity’ I will present some data from the schools from the perspective of ‘Teacher Leaders and the Principal’ and then ‘The Principal and Teacher Leaders.’

Teacher Leaders’ Influence on the Principal

In School A, the principal spoke of the technology teacher saying that the principal’s knowledge of technology ‘came through working with him. He’s had a lot of influence in this school.’ One of the teacher nominators described the teacher leader as ‘the power behind the trouble.’
In School B the principal felt that teacher leaders were ‘the kind of people that when I want something done, and want it done well I can go to her. I know it’ll be done.’ The principal saw the teacher leader in School C as a sounding board, or valued second opinion to his own. He stated, ‘She’s one of the people I use to bounce things off before I go to the staff. She might tell me how to better approach it with the staff.’ School D’s principal mentioned ‘leading by example.’

**Principals’ Influence on Teacher Leaders**

In discussing the principal’s influence on teacher leaders there were also varied views. In School A the principal stated that ‘I think I’ve created a natural atmosphere that has led all teachers to feel that, not one or two people.’ The female teacher leader challenged School A principal’s ‘natural atmosphere’ and expressed her view that male teacher leaders, and in particular the all male administrators, did not provide mentorship opportunities for females but did for other males.

The principal in School B felt that ‘without that flexibility and that freedom to operate, a teacher can’t be a leader. By trying different things and you’re also giving them some freedom to do it.’ In identifying who teacher leaders were the principal in School C stated that ‘eventually you’ll figure out who your leaders are. I provide opportunities for them to be leaders. I’ve said let’s go with it; let’s try it, you know. I don’t put roadblocks up for them.’

The principal in School D described himself and said ‘I characterise myself as a person who leads through example. The big thing I try to do is get into the classroom, affirm the good things . . . find out anything, information, resources whatever.’ In School E the principal also referred to giving leaders the freedom to act. She pointed out that ‘I think the biggest thing I do is encourage people to be leaders and give them the flexibility to do things their way.’ School F was different in that the principal was not seen positively. In School F one nominator felt the principal did not influence teacher leaders and in referring to one teacher leaders stated that ‘he does what he’s going to do, regardless of administration, school board, or anything.’

**Leadership Relationships**

Gronn (1996) discusses follower-leader relationships saying that ‘reliance on followers – particularly immediate subordinates – makes leaders dependant as well as dominant’ (p. 9). In this way the relationship
reaches a form of intimacy as ‘effective task accomplishment arises out of reciprocity and mutual understanding, and that necessitates openness and self-disclosure, shared intimate personal knowledge, the capacity to predict and anticipate one another, and above all trust’ (p. 9). The influence of teacher leadership on principals was a theme overall with all schools having respondents aware of it. Even more recognised however, was the principal’s influence on teacher leadership. This was the top ranked influence overall with an almost three to one margin in comparison to leader influence on principals.

In this study the nature of the relationship between teacher leaders and principals there was leadership reciprocity, which existed in varying forms in these schools. These leadership relationships can be presented as 3 models of influence related to leadership reciprocity as: ‘The Buffered Relationship’, ‘The Interactive Relationship’, and ‘The Contested Relationship.’

In the ‘buffered relationship’ the principals and most areas of decision-making were surrounded by teacher leaders but relatively isolated from other teachers in the school. Some features of this relationship were:

- Mixture of issues of shared decision-making.
- Forming a phalanx to protect the principal and exert pressure to serve his decisions once they are convinced as to their merit.
- Insulating the principal from outside influences.
- Often serving to mediate relationships.
- A few core teacher leaders as described by the ‘closed circle clique.’
Teacher leadership was restricted to the more formally recognised roles, or as one respondent put it ‘they are the powers that be.’

This model seems to feature of transformational leadership. Factors of transformational leadership as identified by Leithwood et al. (1997) modified to reflect teacher leadership in this research more specifically relate to; identifying and articulating a vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals, being a role model, meeting high expectations, providing intellectual stimulation, and providing support to others. Typical of such leadership in the interactive relationship model the Principal, teacher leaders, and other teachers would often interact. Decision-making was more evenly dispersed throughout this type of school. The Interactive Relationship was characterised as:

- Widely distributed decision-making.
- Highly interactive and extensive involvement with all teachers.
- More typical transformational leadership.
- Enabling greater teacher leadership.
- Higher in teacher involvement in decision-making.
- More connected with both the external and internal decision-making.
- Teacher leadership and influence on school decision-making could come from either the individual or groups of staff.
- Interactive informal and formal leadership.
- A highly visible principal.
Contested relationship means the principal was outside the loop and stood against the teacher leaders. The Contested Relationship reflected a mixture of factors:

- Teacher leaders were attempting to usurp the locus of decision-making from the principal.
- Marks and Louis (1999) described the problems faced by principals in sharing leadership with inadequate skills.
- This may be gender related, as the male formal leaders seemed intent on blocking the initiatives of the female principal.
- The principal did not seem to have recognised that she needed the support of teacher leaders as described by Gronn (1996) as a ‘dominant-dependant’ paradoxical relationship between administrators and teacher leaders.
- In this case, there was no trust only conflict.
- In this case the principal may have had supporters, but no foot soldiers.

It was apparent that when the teachers, teacher leaders, and the principal interacted decision-making was contested. The teacher leaders were often cited as having strong views and teacher leadership was portrayed as ‘being able to stand up to the principal’. The teacher leaders seemed to believe they were defending their view of this school
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from incursions of the principal. They had rejected the principal and impeded other teacher leaders because they had not met their approval. They seemed to have set themselves up as guardians of the established way.

The staff was unwilling, or unable to challenge them, and some were supportive. The principal seemed to recognise the dilemma but was unable to resolve it. It was not a healthy context in which to initiate change, as these were also formal teacher leaders. This may suggest that formal teacher leadership roles constrain teacher leadership, while informal teacher leadership may enable it in these schools.

CONCLUSION

There is a mixture of conclusions to be drawn about teacher leadership and the relationships between principals and teacher leaders from this study. Specifically:

1. There was mutual and reciprocal influence between teacher leadership and the principal indicated by the respondents.
2. Females in particular saw teacher leaders as influencing the principals more than males, while both support the view that the principal influences teacher leadership.
3. Principals stood out by the number of references in proportion to their numbers.
4. The relationship between principal and teacher leaders is problematic:
   · It has the potential to broaden decision-making.
   · Enable greater teacher involvement in decision-making.
   · It has the potential to create hierarchies amongst teachers who are more or less closely associated with the locus of decision-making.
   · This may exclude some teachers.

Marks and Louis (1999) discuss some of the issues related the above conclusions and leadership relationships stating that ‘power was often consolidated either with the administration, a small group of teachers . . . most teachers were unable to exercise influence’ (p. 710). More positively, however Gronn (1996) describes the transformational aspects of sharing leadership saying ‘followers experience such extreme moral
uplift by engagement with transformative leaders that they are capable of becoming leaders themselves’ (p. 8).

- Formal teacher leadership can impede some forms of teacher leadership.
- It tends to exclude some groups or individuals from leadership roles, and can reduce the distribution of decision-making and teacher leadership in these schools.
- This comes in the form of a conditional statement: if formal teacher leaders are more typical of administrative leaders then they may tend to reflect administrative leadership biases and managerial roles rather than instructional or transformational roles.
- These same leadership roles reflect many of the traditional biases towards women and younger teachers.

There is some support of this position in a study conducted by Leithwood and Jantzi (1997) on transformational leadership prototypes. In studying teacher leadership ‘prototypes’ Leithwood and Jantzi (1997) described three demographic characteristics found in their study. They stated that

- Women teachers are more likely than men teachers to possess leader prototypes, which include female behaviour traits and transformational leadership practices.
- Younger and less experienced teachers are likely to possess leader prototypes, which include transformational leadership practices.
- Elementary teachers are more likely than secondary teachers to possess prototypes that include traits and behaviours, and transformational leadership practices.

In contrast formal leadership positions tend to reflect traditional leadership biases (Ryan, 1999) and as such may actually be used to exclude potential sources of teacher leadership. This seems the case in Schools A and F, which had the only school with formal teacher leaders (both male). In the case of School F the male teacher leader was often in direction opposition to the female principal. In this case there was a ‘Contested Relationship’ between the principal and what she termed ‘the oldest two males on Staff.’ Teachers seemed in support of these leaders. School A was subtler hence is better described as a ‘Buffered
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Relationship.’ One teacher nominator commented on the formal teacher leader of School A as ‘the power behind the trouble.’ The male department head was described by the principal as sometimes ‘rubbing people the wrong way’ also this teacher leader did not like others getting involved in some of ‘his’ technology areas as they might ‘mess it up.’ Also in this case the male teacher leaders buffered the principal and sometimes excluded the female teacher leader. The female teacher leader in School A came to prominence by here activities in the school as a volunteer and by leveraging her influence as chairperson of the school council. She was also critical of her male counterpart for preferring to mentor males while ignoring potential female leaders. In both schools A and F the teacher leaders involved in what I would describe as biased leadership prototypes (i.e. male and more typical of traditional administrative biases) where male and had formal teacher leadership as department heads. The other school did not have such roles and tended not to exclude other sources of teacher leadership.

Similarly then, as was the case in Leithwood and Jantzi (1997) in this study, I suggest that in the context of fewer formal leadership positions, informal teacher leadership roles are more likely to be influenced by females and less experienced teachers. This may be because, with respect to formal leadership structure, the 6 schools studied resemble elementary schools where there are few formal teacher leadership roles that would act to inhibit such leadership prototypes. This setting allows a more interactive relationship between teachers, teacher leaders, and administrators.

REFERENCES


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