Promoting Teacher Leadership: Myth, Reality and a Vision

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The issue of teacher leadership is attracting increasing attention as school administrators search for ways to strengthen the skills of their teaching staff and professional learning in schools. When I began this inquiry into teacher leadership I was expecting to examine ways to nurture and support individual teachers as they tried out new leadership roles. In looking at the issue of teacher leadership through a critical lens however, my current inquiry focuses less on the emergent nature of this phenomenon, and instead seeks to unmask the systemic issues inherent in the selection, promotion and recognition of teacher leaders in the educational system. In this paper I question the myth and tacit assumptions behind a hierarchical method of recruitment for leadership positions and expose the ways in which this requirement reflects a circular system of social reproduction. I articulate a vision for teacher leadership development in schools, which challenges the dominant discourse, expands definitions of teacher leadership, perceptions of who can be teacher leaders and ways in which teacher leadership can be recognized and fostered.

I present the dominant discourse in the field concerning teacher leadership in Figure 1. The triangular shape of the figure represents a common understanding that getting promoted into administrative positions is perceived as a ‘rising up’ from the ranks of teachers into an elite group of division employees labeled administrators, who are the ones who provide leadership for schools in particular and the division as a whole. The smaller size of the Administration section on the figure is indicative of its smaller and select membership and contrasts with the larger base of the figure which represents all teachers at the start of their career.

The myth of teacher leadership to which I refer in this paper therefore, represents the hierarchical promotion or ascension of classroom teacher to teacher leader, divisional leader and
ultimately into administration. This path is perceived to be transparent, attainable and equally accessible to everyone who is interested in leadership. Promotion is understood to be a reflection of hard work, talent and aptitude for leadership. This is the path many teachers have followed into administration; so why do I refer to this path to leadership as a myth? It is a myth that this path is equally clear for all teachers, because at each step of the way there are hidden obstacles which interfere, sideline or rule out certain individuals. These systemic structures operate subconsciously and as a result the individuals chosen to be administrators often replicate the existing social structure.

Figure 1. The myth of teacher leadership.

The power of the administrator in the dominant discourse presented in Figure 1 cannot be underestimated. Not only are administrators at the apex of the organizational figure, they are also in position to promote and accelerate the careers of selected teachers by choosing them for leadership positions and recommending them for positions which will allow them to access further leadership training and experience. In addition administrators are the ones who, through their hiring practices, choose the teachers who enter the system at the bottom of the hierarchy.
This authoritative power allows administrators to select people as teachers and potential leaders who they feel an affinity towards, most often this means they will look, move and sound a lot like the administrators themselves.

Raymond (cited in Apple, 2004) refers to schools as institutions which are “agents of cultural and ideological hegemony” (p.5), which help create people who see no possibility other than the status quo. If schools have a tendency to reproduce themselves, then a critical view of the institution requires “an analysis of which economic groups and classes seem to be helped by the way the institutions in our society are organized and controlled and which groups are not” (Apple, 2004, p. 10). With middle class culture being that which is heavily valued and replicated in schools as institutions, it is that culture which is reproduced. This is problematic in that our personal experience and understandings influence the leadership we provide and the decisions we make may not reflect the communities we serve.

The circular nature of this process of selection and promotion contributes to what I call the reality of opportunities for teacher leadership, represented in Figure 2. I use a circular model because the hierarchical model does not accurately represent what occurs. To even begin this mythological ‘rise to the top’ requires a positive self-concept which allows a teacher to perceive of her or himself as a potential leader with the skills and experience necessary to take on any beginning leadership positions. If the skills and knowledge a teacher has acquired throughout his or her life are not considered high status knowledge then that teacher will not feel he or she has the pre-requisite skills to take on a leadership role. Critical theorists refer to the two principles operating here as internal colonization and low status skills and knowledge. Internal colonization is a phenomenon where members of a racial or cultural group which has historically been colonized actually adopt the attitudes of the colonizers toward their own cultural or racial group
(Tejeda, Espinoza & Gutierrez, 2003) and remove themselves from consideration for potential leadership positions, believing that they are not capable of being leaders. Apple (2004) talks about the importance of high status knowledge in schools: “Schools confer cultural legitimacy on the knowledge of specific groups” (p. 61); therefore the knowledge of those in administrative positions influences which leadership positions and opportunities will be made available to teachers.

![Diagram of teacher leadership]

**Figure 2. Reality of teacher leadership.**

Working through and within an existing organizational system requires both social and cultural capital. One of the ways in which social and cultural capital affects teachers’ ‘progression through’ to leadership positions is that to become a teacher leader, one has to receive the support and endorsement of colleagues. As we have seen, if teachers are unable to demonstrate that they have the necessary social and cultural capital, to be perceived by peers as “competent, credible and approachable” (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009, p.14), then it is unlikely they will move into teacher leader positions.
As we have seen in both Figures 1 and 2, teachers who do become teacher leaders have the opportunity to acquire and demonstrate the leadership skills and experience which facilitate promotion into more formal leadership roles. Moving into formal leadership roles entails being chosen and selected for those positions by people in positions of power. As we have seen, these individuals who tend to reflect the dominant culture and class, will most likely select teachers for leadership positions who they see as representing these attributes; this is referred to as cultural reproduction (Apple, 2004; McLaren, 2003).

One necessary step for being accepted as an administrator is demonstrating, while in a formal teacher leadership role, the appropriate level of cultural competency required for an administrative position. This involves showing an understanding of how the system works in terms of power, priorities and process. Essentially at this level the institution chooses whether they want and trust you to represent them. Naturally all of these supposed competencies are heavily biased, in favor of the middle class mainstream values of those doing the selection, and are neither neutral nor equally familiar to all teachers.

These three terms: cultural capital, cultural competency and cultural reproduction, are not commonly found in the literature on teacher leadership, though they are common terms in critical theory. Bourdieu describes cultural capital as “ways of talking, acting, models of style, moving, socializing, forms of knowledge, language practices and values” (cited in McLaren, 2003, p.93). This narrow notion of what is acceptable cultural capital, also influences those who see themselves as possible educators, and restricts them from applying for admission into education faculties. Viewed through this critical lens, the reality of teacher leadership is that it seems to be largely a system of social reproduction; the inequities present in teacher leadership reflect those in society.
The myth and reality models of teacher leadership presented have made visible the hidden impact of societal and systemic issues on the identification and promotion of teacher leaders. Substantial numbers of teachers are marginalized as a result of systemic inequities that discriminate on the basis of experience, knowledge, skills and behavior; factors which are perceived as neutral. Others are alienated by their lack of familiarity and comfort with the hierarchical structure of the educational system. There is nothing neutral about this process. It perpetuates societal structures as they currently exist and will continue to do so unless the cycle is interrupted. There is clearly a need to upset the status quo in teacher leadership and ensure that the leaders in our educational system reflect not only our student and teacher population, but also the principles of diversity and social justice.

My review of the research literature suggests that issues related to cultural and social reproduction do not seem to have made significant inroads into teacher leadership research to date. The issue of power is beginning to be understood as a factor which influences the ability of teacher leaders to be effective in schools. Usually this is in reference to the power held by school-based administrators, concerns about whether teacher leadership itself is a power-laden expectation of teachers, and how skilled individual teacher leaders are at maneuvering through the hierarchy. Few scholars are questioning the process of acquiring leadership skills and experience which could equip teachers to become teacher leaders. Although social justice issues are mentioned occasionally, specifically gender and age (Anderson, 2002; Margolis, 2008), comments relate to how these issues can be obstacles to having an impact as a teacher leader, not as systemic barriers to becoming a teacher leader. Fitzgerald and Gunter (2008), however, take the position that future scholarship on teacher leadership should be socially critical, generate alternate viewpoints and work towards social justice” (p.336).
My vision for teacher leadership is my response to Fitzgerald and Gunter’s challenge. Figure 3 is in the shape of a trapezoid with a small base which expands as teachers acquire leadership experience. By inverting the shape I want to suggest that many more teachers can and should be considered leaders, through a process of including and building on strengths. The ultimate goal of teacher leadership is redirected from obtaining an administrative position to using leadership skills to influence others and the system. This vision of teacher leadership most closely corresponds to the definition of teacher leadership adopted by York-Barr and Duke in their 2004 meta-analysis of twenty years of scholarship. They state:

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)

Embedding this vision in a strength-based approach to leadership is imperative if our educational institutions are to become diverse, socially just and inclusive places in which to work and learn.

This emphasis on social justice, equity and leadership should be obvious from students’ earliest exposures to the profession as pre-service teacher candidates in faculties of education. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) recommend teacher candidates be given a very clear orientation in their university classes that teaching is leadership and that taking on leadership roles is an expectation of all teachers (p.49). I believe that pre-service teachers should be exposed to the concepts of critical theory and social justice discussed in this paper and learn to question the
impact of their practice and the system, both direct and indirect, on students, colleagues and community members. It is only with this awareness that teachers can anticipate and attempt to mitigate the potentially hidden inequality of their actions.

Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) challenge a common assumption that only some teachers can be leaders. To picture teacher leadership as an expansive practice which can benefit and engage all teachers involves conceiving of leadership as contextual and differentiated. In the words of these authors: “Teacher leaders lead within and beyond the classroom; identify and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders; influence others toward improved educational practice; and accept responsibility for achieving the outcomes of their leadership” (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009, p.6). This type of highly skilled, contextual and diverse teacher leadership does not develop equally in all schools. Three factors which impede schools from developing strong teacher leaders are egalitarian norms which discourage leadership, teachers feeling they lack the skills, and the school culture (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009. p. 5).

Mitigating the impact of these issues and the societal inequities perpetuated by the educational system, requires deliberate, intentional and critical action by school administrators.
The literature on effective administrative actions includes the importance of dialogue as a tool for developing relationships and collegiality (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Lieberman & Miller, 2008); a shared leadership model which includes processes for decision making (Donaldson, 2006); conceiving of teachers and administrators as the lead learners in the school (Lieberman & Miller, 2008); collaborative practice incorporating action research (Blasé & Blasé, 1999; Glanz, 2006) and naturally, developing leadership capacity (Lambert, 2002a, 2002b, 2003). Robinson (2007), in her meta-analysis of 26 studies on school leadership, found overwhelming evidence that by far the most significant impact school leaders can have is through “leadership that not only promotes, but directly participates with teachers in, formal or informal professional learning” (p.8).

Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson and Hann (2002), studied school leaders who were effective in supporting teacher leadership and found they: “communicate strategic intent” (p.52), “incorporate the aspirations and views of others” (Crowther et al. p. 53), “Pose difficult-to-answer questions” (Crowther et al. p. 55); “make space for individual innovation” (Crowther et al. p. 56), “know when to step back” (Crowther et al. p.58), and “create opportunities from perceived difficulties” (Crowther et al. p.60). Their final finding is to “build on achievements to create a culture of success” (2002, p.62). This statement relates closely to building a positive school culture and empowering teachers: “principals who emphasize culture building and encourage teacher engagement in associated processes help teachers to view themselves as generators of new forms of meaning and as shapers of community values” (p.64). Hoy and Miskel (1996) suggest that through this mentorship process “followers become leaders and leaders become change agents, and ultimately transform the organization” (p. 393).
The expansive strategies I identify in this section of the paper and in figure four can also be found on the reverse side of your handout in a larger format. These are approaches I believe have the potential to expand the pool of teachers who become involved in leadership work as well as maintain the diversity of both the pool and the leadership work teachers engage in. When you look at this diagram begin at the level of teacher and picture the strategies as fitting in between the layers of the trapezoid in Figure 3. A larger version of this slide is printed on the reverse side of your handout.

The first level of expansion strategies is to profile different leaders and strive especially to provide examples which challenge stereotypes about who can be a leader, by actively celebrating leaders of different ages, genders, abilities, races, cultures and languages. The goal at this stage is to have everyone on staff see themselves as a potential leader. Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson & Hann (2002) recommend that all teachers should be provided with professional education about leadership, have an opportunity to self-assess as well as learn the specific leadership skills required of a teacher leader. They state: “potential teacher leaders … are seldom, in our experience, aware of their leadership capabilities. Nor are they aware of the strength or nature of their individual styles, in terms of personality, teaching approach, or leadership” (p. 57). Teachers finding themselves well-suited for leadership might then be supported in considering a position. As mentioned earlier, to be perceived as competent and capable, with the appropriate social skills to be a teacher leader, teachers must be viewed that way by their peers. To minimize the impact of stereotypes regarding specific cultures, nationalities or other differences in teaching or leadership style, school staff should be engaged in cross-cultural, anti-racist professional development and sensitivity training around social justice issues.
Figure 4. Mitigating strategies for teacher leadership.

Since many teachers will not recommend or volunteer themselves for leadership positions, even with using self-assessment and professional development, it is important that administrators make a conscious effort to provide leadership opportunities for all staff members. This can be done through listening carefully to teachers interests, observing them closely in different contexts and giving them a nudge to try out a leadership role when you think they might be ready and or interested. A final strategy for administrators is to make it clear that the school’s culture is one which highly values teacher leadership and recognizes that leadership can take on many different forms.

Strategies which will support those who perhaps feel less confident in a teacher leadership position, or who might have trouble being accepted by others as leaders, include providing mentorship (Lipton & Wellman, 2003) or coaching so they can get specific feedback and reflect on their practice. One side benefit of these relationships is that mentors can provide the emotional and social support teachers need as they strengthen their leadership skills.
Additional group support can be provided through connecting individuals to networks of teacher leaders with which they can share their practice and engage in professional dialogue, action research, and other ongoing professional learning activities (Glanz, 2006; Henderson & Hawthorne, 2000; Lieberman and Miller, 2008; Timperley, 2008). The final area of support at this level is through affirmative action. Knowing that the systemic inequities mentioned in section two of this paper will favour some teachers, administrators can support divisional affirmative action initiatives which help ensure that qualified individuals who are members of marginalized groups are considered for formal leadership positions.

The final hurdle for teachers interested in expanding their sphere of influence through leadership involves moving and being seen in different circles. School divisions can support teacher leaders at this stage by offering ongoing professional development, financial or in-kind support for those pursuing graduate work in leadership, and opportunities to network with others interested and or engaged in leadership. Supporting individuals at this stage of their leadership development involves expanding their leadership capacity as well as their visibility, something which is of particular importance for teachers who might otherwise not be noticed. Strategies at this level cannot overpower the hierarchical system which is so entrenched in our schools and school divisions; however they might help to set the stage for a new vision of leadership which over time can produce more diverse and inclusive leadership teams.

The mitigating strategies that I have presented represent my vision for teacher leadership that is seen as important and possible for all teachers. The specific strategies I have suggested are a compensatory attempt to retain the full complement of teachers in the leadership pool and develop the leadership capacity of all staff. Lambert (2003) maintains, and I have argued, that:
All teachers have the right, capability and responsibility to be leaders, therefore the major challenge is not to identify who is and who is not a teacher leader but to create a context that evokes leadership from all teachers. Such a context is borne of a new conception of leadership itself and the language that suggests it, including different governing assumptions, and a framework for school improvement now known as leadership capacity. (p.422)

Developing teacher leadership capacity requires, as Lambert says, different assumptions and a different framework. I have tried to articulate and problematize the existing system to establish the need for a shift in the boundaries which regulate teacher leadership. I have created a counter-discourse (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007, p.31) by offering a vision for teacher leadership which builds on principles of inclusion, diversity and social justice. Finally, I have articulated both individual and systemic approaches to create spaces in which established modes of thinking can be challenged and leadership nurtured. I have left, for further reflection and study, the development of a learning-focused framework for enacting these principles in a school setting.
References


