The Center
FOR COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL REFORM AND IMPROVEMENT

RESEARCH BRIEF

www.centerforcsri.org

What does the RESEARCH *tell us about* Teacher Leadership?

The Study

York-Barr, J., & Duke, K. (2004). What do we know about teacher leadership? Findings from two decades of scholarship. *Review of Educational Research 74*(3), 255–316.

Methodology

The authors of this meta-analysis investigated the concept and practice of teacher leadership in the research literature from the past two decades. The literature reviewed includes numerous small-scale, qualitative studies that describe dimensions of teacher leadership practice, teacher leader characteristics, and conditions that promote and challenge teacher leadership.

In Brief

In this age of high accountability, teacher quality is receiving more attention than ever before. Research that investigates ways to increase teacher quality is much needed, making this study a timely addition to the literature. Although increases in student achievement related to teacher quality have yet to be adequately documented, the research is promising. The purpose of the research presented in the study is twofold: (1) to summarize findings through a comprehensive review of the teacher leadership literature and (2) to develop a conceptual framework based on that summary that can guide both current practice and future inquiry about teacher leadership.

Teacher leadership has been defined in a variety of ways during the past two decades, making distinct

The Center
FOR COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL REFORM AND IMPROVEMENT

comparisons across the literature difficult. The authors suggest the following definition:

> Teacher leadership is the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of the school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement. Such team leadership work involves three intentional development foci: individual development, collaboration or team development, and organizational development. (pp. 287–288)

Teacher leaders are facilitators within the school and can be an important element in spreading and strengthening school reform and improvement. Educational improvement at the instructional level, for example, involves leadership by teachers in the classroom (p. 255). Tasks performed by teacher leaders include monitoring improvement efforts, selecting curriculum, and participating in administrative meetings. In addition, they often are called upon to participate in peer coaching, engage parent and community participation, and review research in their time away from the classroom. Typically, these leaders are teachers who have significant teaching experience, are known to be excellent educators, and are respected by their peers. They are learning and achievement oriented and willing to take risks and assume responsibility. These teachers use a variety of informal and formal channels to exert leadership, including acting as union representatives, department heads, and mentors.

The authors claim optimal conditions in three key areas can foster the growth of teacher leaders: school culture and context, roles and relationships, and structures. School culture and context can facilitate leadership when the following characteristics are present:
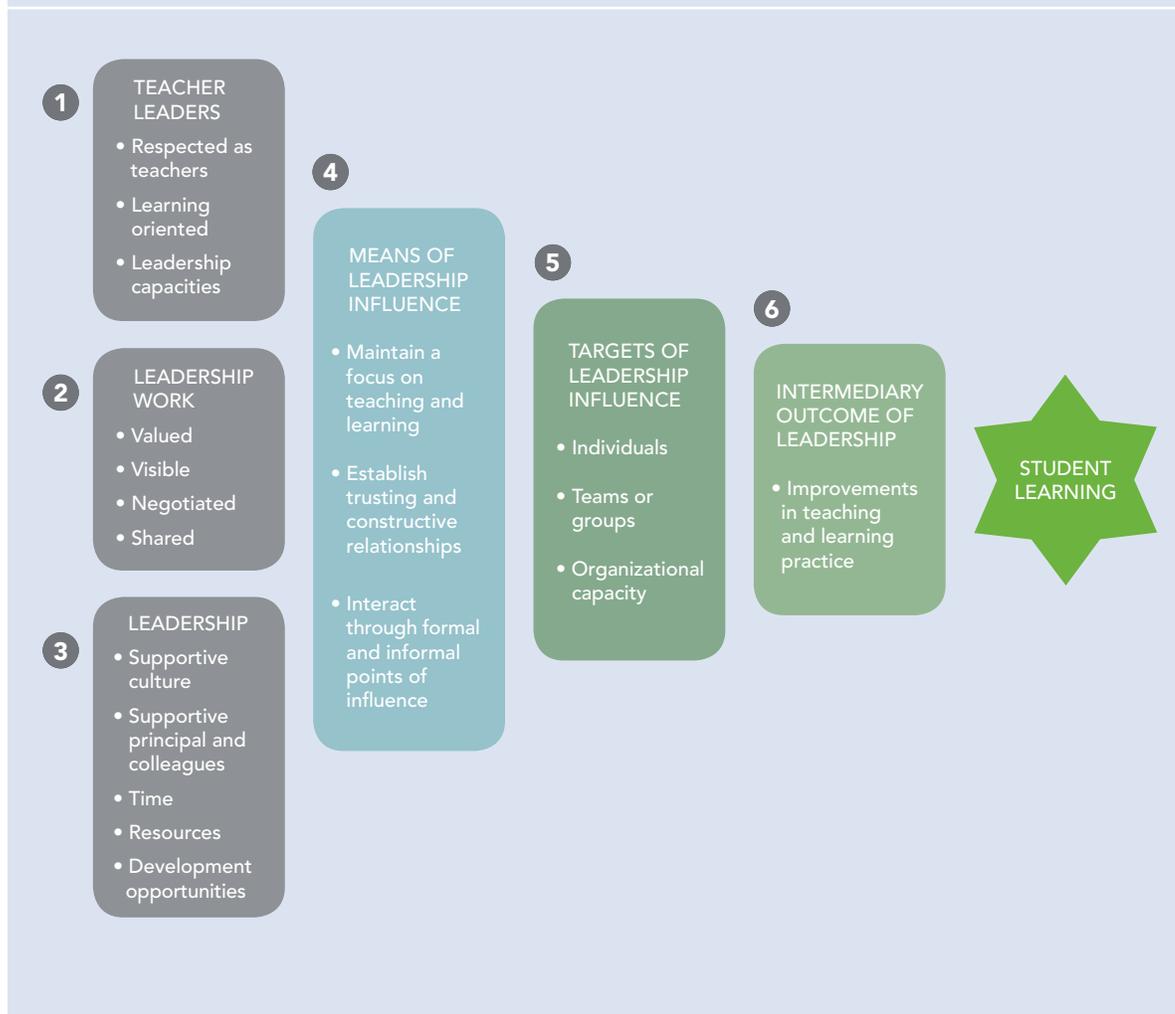
- A schoolwide focus on learning, inquiry, and reflective practice.

- Encouragement for taking initiative.

- An expectation of teamwork and shared responsibility, decision making, and leadership.

- Teaching professionals being valued as role models.

- A strong sense of community among teachers that fosters professionalism.

Teacher leadership also is nurtured through roles and relationships when:

- Colleagues recognize and respect teacher leaders who have subject-area and instructional expertise.

- High trust and positive working relationships exist both among teacher peers and with administrators.

- Teacher leadership work that is central to the teaching and learning processes (as opposed to administrative or managerial tasks) is routinely assigned.

- Teacher-leader and administrator-leader domains are clearly defined, including their shared leadership responsibilities.

- Interpersonal relationships between teacher leaders and the principal flourish.

≁ Teachers use a variety of informal and formal channels to exert leadership, including acting as union representatives, department heads, and mentors.

Figure 1. A Conceptual Framework for Teacher Leadership

1 TEACHER LEADERS
- Respected as teachers
- Learning oriented
- Leadership capacities

2 LEADERSHIP WORK
- Valued
- Visible
- Negotiated
- Shared

3 LEADERSHIP
- Supportive culture
- Supportive principal and colleagues
- Time
- Resources
- Development opportunities

4 MEANS OF LEADERSHIP INFLUENCE
- Maintain a focus on teaching and learning
- Establish trusting and constructive relationships
- Interact through formal and informal points of influence

5 TARGETS OF LEADERSHIP INFLUENCE
- Individuals
- Teams or groups
- Organizational capacity

6 INTERMEDIARY OUTCOME OF LEADERSHIP
- Improvements in teaching and learning practice

STUDENT LEARNING

Lastly, structures can foster the growth of teacher leaders by providing adequate access to materials, time, and space for activities that facilitate teacher leadership (e.g., professional development).

Suggestions for School Improvement

The authors offer a conceptual framework (see Figure 1) for improving or expanding a teacher leadership program in schools. The framework (p. 289) is comprised of six major components that build a pathway to the final outcome of high student achievement. The first three describe the conditions necessary for teacher

leaders to emerge and the foundation for teacher leadership: (1) they are respected as teachers, want to learn leadership skills, and have the capacity to develop such skills; (2) their work as leaders is valued by their peers, visible in the school, continually negotiated through feedback and evaluation, and shared among teachers; and (3) the culture within the school supports teacher leaders, supervisors and colleagues encourage leadership, and teachers are provided the time, resources, and opportunities to develop leadership skills.

When teacher leaders emerge in this grounded setting, they (4) maintain "a focus on teaching and learning and establish

The Center
FOR COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL
REFORM AND IMPROVEMENT

~ Cultural norms of isolation and individualism within the teaching profession and the worst-case scenario "crab bucket culture" can slow the progress of school improvement.

trusting and constructive relationships" (p. 290). They build influence in both formal and informal situations, honing their skills through collaborating routinely with peers and administrators.

The author's conceptual framework identifies the kinds of work that teacher leaders engage in, what they call (5) the "targets of leadership influence." For example, they concern themselves with making sure there is adequate ongoing professional development, work on establishing a collaborative team structure within the school, or focus on organizational capacities (such as policies and allocation of resources) that contribute to improved teaching and learning in the classroom. Enhanced teacher leadership produces (6) intermediary outcomes that improve teaching and learning "such as creating positive learning relationships between teachers and students and among students, establishing classroom routines and expectations that effectively direct student energy, engaging the student in the learning process, and improving curricular, instructional, and assessment practices," which ultimately result in high levels of student learning and achievement (p. 290).

Challenges

The authors also point out challenges and obstacles to the development of teacher leaders. Inadequate time for collaboration, learning, and leading as well as a lack of incentives for engaging in leadership activities have been shown empirically to impede the development of teacher leaders. In addition, cultural norms of isolation and individualism

within the teaching profession and the worst-case scenario "crab bucket culture" can slow the progress of school improvement. The authors cite Daniel L. Duke's metaphor of crabbing: Crab fishermen do not need to place a lid on their buckets because if a crab tries to escape, the others grab it and pull it back down into the bucket. Duke, in the 1994 book *Teachers as Leaders: Perspectives on the Professional Development of Teachers,* likens crabbing to the discord that many teachers are faced with in their own schools. In such a culture, or even milder varieties, the authors say teachers may be reluctant to "advance" and violate egalitarian norms (p. 294).

Other challenges include overly hierarchical relationships with peers, where teacher leaders exercise authority instead of working collaboratively. The appointment of a teacher leader by an administrator without teacher input, uncertainty about teacher leader versus principal domains of leadership, and inadequate communication and feedback among teacher leaders, principal, and staff can all contribute to conflict. Traditional top-down leadership structures, the authors suggest, may also stand in the way of developing teacher leaders and a structure to support them (p. 276).

Such challenges can impede school improvement because they detract from allowing qualified teachers to act as facilitators in reform efforts. The crux of the necessity for teacher leadership is that such teachers help in the administration of school reform. Elements of school structure and culture that stand in the way of teachers being able to facilitate improvement may prove detrimental to the sustainability of improvement efforts.

Bottom Line

The answer to the question "What do we know about the effectiveness of teacher leadership?" is, in short, somewhat lacking. Due to a dearth of high-quality research and consistent definitions of teacher leadership, the findings presented in two decades of literature are inconclusive. There does, however, seem to be an intersection within the divergent literature demonstrating that traditional top-down management structures impede the development of teacher leaders and, consequently, school improvement. What is clear from this study is that traditional forms of management must be modified to be more horizontal and less hierarchical for teacher leadership to flourish. In a time that demands a higher standard of annual progress for all students, it seems prudent to encourage and foster teacher leadership by providing the resources, culture, and structures it needs to thrive. Drawing on the resourcefulness of experienced teachers and allowing them to facilitate school improvement is one way to ensure the sustainability of school reform efforts.

What is clear from this study is that traditional forms of management must be modified to be more horizontal and less hierarchical for teacher leadership to flourish.

The Center
FOR COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL
REFORM AND IMPROVEMENT

Other Resources

Suggested Readings

Cooke, P. D. (2001, Fall). Generating teacher leadership. *On Common Ground, 9.* Retrieved September 1, 2005, from http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/pubs/A22/Cooke.html

Crowther, F., Kaagan, S. S., Ferguson, M., & Hann, L. (2002). *Developing teacher leaders: How teacher leadership enhances school success.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Lieberman, A., & Miller, L. (2004). *Teacher leadership.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Miller, S. (2002, July). *Teacher leadership for effective schools.* (Prepared for the Oregon Education Association). Oregon State Action for Education Leadership Project. Retrieved September 1, 2005, from http://www.ous.edu/aca/SAELP/OEA_ldrshp.pdf

Sweeney, D. (2003). Teacher leadership: Switching roles. In D. Sweeney, *Learning along the way: Professional development by and for teachers* (pp. 87–96). Portland, ME: Stenhouse. Retrieved September 1, 2005, from http://www.stenhouse.com/pdfs/0343ch08.pdf

U. S. Department of Education (1998, April). *Teachers leading the way: Voices from the National Teacher Forum.* Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved September 1, 2005, from http://www.ed.gov/pubs/TeachersLead/index.html

Web Sites

The Center for Teacher Leadership
www.ctl.vcu.edu/
This nonpartisan, nonprofit organization was established to promote and support teacher leadership in order to improve teaching and learning.

Teacher Leadership Network
www.holmespartnership.org/teacher.html
This group works to promote teacher leadership in schools that work with colleges, encourages continuing education of teacher leaders, and recognizes the contributions of teachers.

LEARNING POINT
Associates