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Jennifer Groves

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EMPOWERING TEACHERS: DEVELOPING MEANINGFUL LEADERSHIP

jennifer groves

Definition of a Teacher Leader

In the call for this *Occasional Paper*, teacher leaders are described as those who advocate for change, serve as models for colleagues, and provide informal mentoring within the school. I will add to the definition here.

I think a teacher leader is someone who seeks opportunities to grow and develop as a professional, someone who tries new methods, takes risks, and is willing to share his/her learning with others. S/he is not necessarily someone who has been officially designated a coach, mentor, or teacher leader. Teacher leaders communicate their knowledge and experience to others. To me, that is what makes them leaders. Teacher leaders serve more than their own needs. They have a willingness and motivation to nurture collegial relationships and to share both the ups and the downs of their own stories.

Seeds of Empowerment

As a second-grade teacher, I tried to create a learning environment, curriculum, and style of teaching that would empower my students. I didn't believe that I was the sole (or best) source of knowledge in the room, and I wanted my students to understand that we were all learners, inspiring each other with our questions and discoveries. Barth describes a community where all members, teachers and students alike, are committed learners (2001). I wanted to help my students develop the confidence to wonder and the skills to pursue their curiosity.

In the following pages, I describe how I was instrumental in creating a similar framework to empower my colleagues, promote adult development, and help build a school culture that mirrored the priorities I set in my classroom, so that adults were encouraged to inspire each other, to keep the cycle of learning going, and to build teacher leadership into a powerful model within the school.

A Professional Learning Initiative

In my district, teachers had been working in collaborative teams for several years. Teacher teams met weekly to review student performance on assessments, set goals for achievement, implement interventions, and monitor progress. Fewer

students were slipping through the cracks, and team monitoring efforts were raising student achievement. But to me, something was missing despite all of the work we were doing. Our culture still seemed, for the most part, focused on the individual rather than on the community.

I wanted our school culture—“how we do things around here”—to reflect certain qualities (Eaker, DuFour and DuFour, 2002, p. 9). I wanted to see greater collegiality, more risk taking, and truly honest sharing among teachers. As Sarason (1996) wrote, “teachers cannot create and sustain contexts for productive learning unless those conditions [risk-taking, sharing, questioning] exist for them” (p. 367). In schools, he further observed, “there were absolutely no forums, no traditions that brought teachers together on a scheduled basis... What I found was a culture of individuals, not a group concerned with pedagogical theory, research, and practice” (p. 367). I asked myself what our school could do to provide teachers with a well thought-out plan that spoke to their development as professionals, and then decided to submit a proposal for a K-12 book club.

In book club, teachers would not only meet and talk about the book, but also take part in meaningful learning activities; we would take action. I wanted to bring teachers together who didn't work with each other regularly, which is why I chose the K-12 focus. I knew the book club topics would need to apply to teachers of all grades. I wanted the emphasis to be on what unites teachers, rather than what separates them. In my small district of 730 students and approximately 65 full-time teachers, it seemed that improving K-12 relationships was both feasible and necessary. In a bigger way, I saw improving the interactions between teachers as a way to build a more cohesive and truly supportive school culture, in which the seeds of teacher leadership could really grow.

Respecting Teachers' Needs

I wanted to give teachers what they needed. I surveyed the staff and asked teachers what type of professional development would help them do their jobs better. I asked them how past programs had impacted their teaching and the learning of their students and received substantial feedback. I brought this feedback along with an outline for my proposal to the professional development committee, of which I was a member. I received almost instant approval and my superintendent even agreed to purchase the book for staff members. I chose *Choice Words: How Our Language Affects Children's Learning* (Johnston, 2004) for the book club. The book suited our needs perfectly. The subject, improving the self-

efficacy of students, was an appropriate theme. Self-efficacy, or “agency,” as Johnston calls it, was what I was trying to promote in teachers as well. And, with ten chapters of about ten pages each, *Choice Words* was quite manageable. I worked with a local college to offer graduate credit for participation, so the club also became a course. Eventually two-thirds of the faculty purchased the book and one-third enrolled in the club. I was offering my colleagues what they wanted and their enthusiastic response verified that. I was thrilled at the prospect of so many within the school having a common experience and using new knowledge together to affect student learning in a powerful way.

In the classroom, I gave my students choice in order to foster engagement and buy-in. I wanted to do the same with my colleagues. The two main activities in the course were journaling on a wiki (a collaborative website whose content can be edited by anyone who has access to it) and doing peer observations. Within these activities, teachers could pick their own timelines and focus. I hoped this flexibility would make teachers more invested and increase the learning curve.

Journaling on a Wiki

I had been part of many classes that required a personal journal. Too often I wrote all my journal entries the night before they were due, and I wondered how I could make journaling a more meaningful tool this time. We created an online wiki. Every two weeks I posted a prompt (from a list we prioritized) that was either an idea or question from *Choice Words*. Teachers would have to respond once in that time period. The wiki allowed us to journal collaboratively, to get away from writing individual entries that would only further the insular experience I wanted to avoid. Teachers posted their questions, the risks they had taken, and their revelations. Many teachers’ entries displayed an openness and vulnerability about their teaching that I had not previously seen. Others, appreciating this candidness, empathized and responded thoughtfully. By the end of the course the wiki had become a document that represented our joint and cumulative learning. It showed actual and substantial progress. (With my colleagues’ consent, please view our wiki at <http://choicewords.pbwiki.com/?doneLogin=1>.)

Reciprocal/Peer Observations

Another activity in the course was peer observation. Barth speaks of this when he writes about improving relationships in the schoolhouse (2006). He describes the power of peer observation and the importance of a non-evaluative

setting. In our school, teachers had always been encouraged to observe each other but seldom had the time, support, or energy to make this happen. Here, it was a requirement. I made sure that it was easy for teachers to get coverage. Busy administrators even offered their time to help with that.

Teachers observed or videotaped each other and then shared their thoughts. For instance, I told my book club partner that I was working on increasing “wait time” with my students during discussions. My partner videotaped my class and we viewed the footage together, discussing my efforts and results. Allowing me to decide what I wanted my partner to help me with removed the onus of being observed and instead created a constructive and nonthreatening atmosphere.

One night a colleague called me and said she had met with her team that afternoon to review their videos. She said the hours had flown by and that everyone had been engaged in the process in an eager and open manner, and that it had been a boost to feel this trust and mutual respect. When I heard this story, I was encouraged. Staff members were nurturing each other. A structure of support was evolving.

As book club participants, we revealed our strengths and challenges. Together we modeled and tried new techniques and offered each other feedback for collective, continued growth. In this sense it felt as if we were all teacher leaders, trying to improve ourselves, taking risks, reflecting on our practice—truly leading by example. Book club helped us create powerful adult learning that fostered teacher leaders. After all, adult learning sets a powerful example for student learning; how can we expect to cultivate growth in our students if we don’t promote it in ourselves?

Overcoming the Challenges to Teacher Leadership: Resistance

Some teachers prefer to remain isolated in their classrooms and have no desire to have a leadership role in their school. These teachers may be successful writing teachers, innovative classroom managers, or experts in children’s literature. Rather than putting them on the spot at a faculty meeting, they could be asked to share an effective strategy with their grade level team. The team can then present that strategy to the whole staff. This is one way to tap into teacher expertise that is both sensitive to different personalities and has the potential for building leadership.

Other resistance comes from attitudes. R. DuFour says that asking someone to act is often more effective than asking someone to change his/her personal beliefs (personal communication, July 16, 2004). Isn’t it easier to ask a teacher to share and discuss with six math colleagues the strategies he/she just learned at a

math conference, rather than telling her him/her to abandon old ways, adopt a more collaborative mindset, and learn to work better with others? In book club, we took this approach. We didn't ask for wholehearted allegiance; we simply asked each other to take one small risk that was different from our normal pedagogy.

School Culture/Adult Learning

If teachers are to become leaders in their schools and districts, mentor colleagues, advocate for change, and informally lead learning initiatives, then these actions must be part of the school structure. They must actually be happening, and in good faith. A culture that promotes continuous learning among its staff is an environment in which teacher leaders can thrive naturally. In my school, teachers were asked to work in collaborative teams. Teachers were also given a sizeable budget for professional development, and were thus encouraged to seek out learning opportunities.

E. Drago-Severson, of Teachers College, Columbia University, states that in order to develop, adults need both challenge and support (personal communication, December 4, 2007). In book club we encouraged each other to examine our teaching and we talked honestly about how we could better empower our students. Our challenge was to improve as teachers. Our support was both internal (confidence in our own abilities) and external (the dedicated support of our colleagues). Mutual support is a condition for fostering and maintaining teacher leaders.

Differentiating for Teacher Growth

It was important to recognize the different timelines that teachers had established for developing this self-efficacy. Not everyone had begun with confidence in his/her own ability to make a difference in the classroom. Some people were ready to take risks and try new methods with little prompting. Others had implemented only small changes by the end of the semester, and only after much deliberation. In their entries on the wiki, several teachers openly declared their struggle with change. They were trying to apply change in their classroom, but it was difficult to do on their own, and they weren't sure they could succeed. Our challenge was to make it possible for each of us to be supported, despite the differences in our personal timelines. The choices offered within journaling and peer observation were one way we accommodated teachers' different needs. Another was recognizing that we wouldn't all be at the same point by the end of the course, but that we would all be moving in a positive direction of growth. The

important idea for us to remember was that teachers on the journey to leadership needed to be provided with consistent support no matter how their journey is unfolding. There is no single road to leadership, nor a single timeline for traveling it. The challenge for each of us was to become leaders in our own way.

The Solution: Looking Inside

I believed we had much talent, untapped knowledge, and expertise within the ranks at our school. Teachers enthusiastically connected with students and created original and engaging curriculum; they were exciting to be around. Rather than seeking wisdom or leadership from the outside, I felt we should look for leaders within our walls. Schools need to trust that often the necessary talent is within and needs only be revealed and allowed to flourish. A structure must exist for this to occur. As Sarason (1996) stated:

School teachers accept the obligation as a group to develop a forum specifically devoted to their growth and development, a forum that acknowledges that there is a world of ideas, theory, research, and practice about which they should be knowledgeable (which is not to say expert) if they are not to wither on the vine, if they, like their students, are to avoid passive resignation to routine (p. 369).

I would argue that teacher leaders are the real experts in the schoolhouse. The value of teachers' accessibility to their colleagues and appreciation and sensitivity to their colleagues' needs cannot be underestimated. An outside facilitator would not have the necessary history and/or tact to support the local teacher leader community. Participating in book club took us out of our regular routine. It improved our morale and provided us with a rich network of support within which to learn. As one colleague reminded me, "book club gave us hope." Teaching is not an assembly line job that produces identical widgets. Dealing with the challenges of the profession requires both thought and reflection, opportunities that are far too scarce in many schools. Teacher leaders are the solution.