TEACHER LEADERSHIP: A JOURNEY FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

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Introduction

Educational circles are sated with concepts such as ‘capacity building’, ‘professional learning communities’, ‘improved student achievement’ and ‘distributed leadership’. What do these terms really mean? What are the possibilities for workplace learning in schools when such notions are fully embraced? What contributes to a climate that explores these ideas? What are the constraints and challenges involved when delving into this educational arena? The possibilities for educators, and therefore students, are endless when those in leadership roles choose to investigate the options available to school teams interested in improving their learning cultures. Encouraging teachers to become leaders in schools outside the walls of their classrooms is a challenging and significant part of principal’s work in the current culture of educational leadership. With the ultimate goal of improving student learning firmly implanted in leaders’ minds, what can educators do to augment professional practice to compliment this desired outcome? One area of focus could be teacher leadership. With the concept of teacher leadership as a guide, the research question for my paper then becomes, “How might school administrators develop a learning culture and climate that facilitates teacher leadership?” Conversely, this paper will also explore the challenges and constraints that are inherent if administrators misunderstand the concept of teacher leadership in attempting to ignite this culture within their schools.

What is teacher leadership? Harris and Muijs (2003) define teacher leadership as developing high quality learning and teaching in schools. It has at its core a focus upon improving learning and is a mode of leadership premised upon the principles of professional collaboration, development and growth. Teacher
leadership is not a formal role, responsibility or set of tasks, it is more a form of agency where teachers are empowered to lead development work that impacts directly upon the quality of teaching and learning. Teacher leaders lead within and beyond the classroom, they identify with and contribute to a community of teachers and influence others towards improved educational practice. In contrast to traditional notions of leadership, teacher leadership is characterised by a form of collective leadership in which teachers develop expertise by working collaboratively. (p. 39-40)

Three central ideas emerge from Harris and Muijs’ definition of teacher leadership. They are professional collaboration, quality teaching and learning, and collective leadership. These concepts are more than simply ideas and theory. They are tangibles that can be put into practice and, when done effectively, they can produce tremendous results. The difficulties begin to arise when educators realize that they must be purposefully planned for. Sustained improvements in teaching and learning do not happen by accident. If this is the situation then how can leaders move from theory to practice? What does a working model of teacher leadership look like? What essentials of teacher leadership do administrators need to know to successfully lead change in their school environment? What consequences could be realized if the transition from theory to practice is not smoothly implemented?

**Contexts of Teacher Leadership**

Linda Lambert defines leadership capacity as “broad-based, skillful participation in the work of leadership” (2003a, p. 425). If educational leaders accept this as the definition, they must understand that a change in traditional school culture needs to take place. “Successful school leadership is not invested in hierarchical status but experience is valued and structures are established to encourage all to be drawn in and
regarded for their contribution” (Harris, 2002, p. 22). When the idea of broad-based participation is embraced, educators can implement a “systemic framework for school improvement, a context in which teacher leadership is invited, supported and appreciated” (Lambert, 2003a, p. 425). What contextual features are necessary in order for this environment to exist?

Firstly, administrators need to understand what teacher leadership is and isn’t. They need to understand that real capacity building emanates from providing opportunities for professional conversations, not for formal leadership roles. Lambert indicates that teacher leaders develop curiosities through their daily associations with the teaching and learning process. “Teachers become fully alive when their schools and districts provide opportunities for skillful participation, inquiry, dialogue, and reflection. They become fully alive in the company of others. Such environments evoke and grow teacher leaderships” (Lambert, 2003a, p. 422).

Lambert’s definition is related to the notion of professional collaboration. When given the opportunity to collaborate professionally, teachers’ practice improves and, as a result, so does their ability to become leaders. When leadership is understood from this perspective, administrators stop looking for formal leadership roles in which to position their teachers, and begin looking for opportunities for collective conversations that will invariably produce many more leaders than any formal role could have.

Learning and leading are intertwined concepts. “Distribution of power and leadership encourages teachers (and community members) to view themselves as important in shaping the school’s direction and values and in exercising influence
beyond the school” (Crowther et. al., 2002, p. 51). If this ideal is understood, the concept of providing time for professional conversation just naturally makes sense. “By their day-to-day actions, principals build the culture of their schools” (Barth, 2001, p. 451). If school-based administrators want to build leadership capacity in teachers, certain structures must be put into place. One such structure is opportunities for professional dialogue. Teachers learn from each other through the process of collective reflection, debate and conversation. When engaged in these meaningful activities, teachers begin to see that their collective learning is in fact a form of leadership. What they do once they have reflected, debated and participated in important dialogue will inevitably lead to improved teaching and learning, which is the primary goal of teacher leadership. Thus, all staff who are involved in redefining leadership realize that change comes from the “processes among us, rather than in the skills or disposition of a leader” (Lambert, 2003a, p. 424).

Once the culture of a school begins to change, the idea of capacity building will surely evolve. So as not to misinterpret, capacity building is not a natural extension of providing teachers with formal leadership roles in isolation of opportunities for collaboration. Rather, building teachers’ capacity for leadership is summarized by Lambert (2003a) in stating, “Leadership actions are nestled within structures that serve as containers for the conversations... . To begin and sustain teacher leadership, begin and sustain the conversation” (p. 426).

*Building Structures for Professional Conversations*
What are the structures that serve as forums for professional conversations? I would suggest that three such forums are mentoring, peer coaching and learning teams. John Gabriel (2005) defines a mentor as a person who “takes on the responsibility of coaching and advising novice teachers and teachers who are new to the school system...the mentor is not only concerned with instructional and organizational needs; he [sic] also lends emotional and moral support to alleviate the stress that the job creates” (p. 6). The mentor/protégé relationship is one where a more experienced colleague, the mentor, utilizes their specialized skills and knowledge to improve the performance of a less experienced colleague or the protégé. Gabriel (2005) lists several items that a new teacher needs to know in the first few weeks of school. These items resemble a checklist that a mentor could use to ensure they are providing the best assistance possible to their protégé. Some of the more pertinent items include providing knowledge and expertise on: classroom management; unit and lesson planning and assessments; helping with effective room setup; discussing homework, late student work and grading and attendance policies; providing a sample welcome letter for parents as well as information to assist with the first evening with parents; discussing fire drills and critical response procedures; reviewing a system of documenting student concerns; and setting aside time during the first month and subsequent days to allow for a conversation to see how the protégé is progressing.

Peer coaching, while similar to mentoring, involves meaningful experiences that are associated with the word “peer”. Peer denotes equality and, as such, these teachers’ classroom visits are meant to be non-threatening. “They are not evaluative and
prescriptive; they are diagnostic and constructive, allowing teachers to experiment and take risks without fear of judgment. There is a safe environment among these volunteers that enables them to converse in a candid manner and learn from each other. This ultimately benefits the teachers’ growth, the team’s growth, and the students’ growth” (Gabriel, 2005, p. 7). Peer coaches interact with one another in an equal manner given that the peer coaches have mutual interests and are typically working together to achieve a common learning goal. Dialogue and debate are crucial aspects of peer coaching. It is through the asking and answering of thought provoking questions that teachers learn and lead. “This form of leadership focuses primarily upon learning; it is located closer to the classroom and is premised upon teachers developing a close working relationship of one another’s teaching based on observation, enquiry and discussion” (Harris, 2002, p. 23). Peer coaches are teacher leaders who are respected for the knowledge and skills that they posses in relation to teaching and learning, and who have demonstrated success in their ability to build positive relationships with their peers. When engaged in the coaching process, it is often hard to discern who the peer coach is as this process has reciprocal learning benefits for each participant as they learn and grow together.

The third structure that encourages professional dialogue is learning teams. Learning teams can take many forms which may include grade level groups, specialty area groups, action research teams, and other such committees that meet together to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools. Chrisman (2005) identified several factors that have led to the success of the learning teams she has worked with.
She indicated that, “Successful schools provided teachers with time to meet as grade-level or subject-matter teams. Moreover, teachers at successful schools reported that they regularly used this collaborative time to review student work and to discuss how to strengthen their classroom instruction” (p. 2). She also stated that learning teams used “informal action research. They used the results of their students’ assessments to compare different instructional strategies and different classroom environments to see which strategies and environments encouraged student learning” (p. 2). This type of discussion strengthened collaboration and led to many teacher-initiated changes that ultimately improved student learning.

**Quality Teaching and Learning**

The second idea integral to teacher leadership is quality teaching and learning. Due to the fact that learning and leading are so closely related, quality leadership must be in place if quality learning is to occur. “Education is a leadership concept: the word education literally means ‘to lead from ignorance’” (Potter, 2001, p. 121). As such, all teachers are leaders whether they recognize themselves as one or not. Great teachers will not allow themselves to become stuck in the monotony of day-to-day life. They keep their curiosity alive by consistently reflecting, inquiring and focusing on ways to improve their skills. Lambert (2003a) claimed, “All teachers have the right, capability and responsibility to be leaders, therefore, the major challenge before us is not to identify who is and who is not a teacher leader but to create a context that evokes leadership from all teachers” (p. 422). Every professional in the school, not just those in
recognized in the formal leadership roles, needs to commit to embracing learning and leading.

Quality teaching and learning originate from the setting of standards, goals and modes of behaviour as a school community. The job of those in the formal leadership roles then becomes one of “creating and nurturing structures that support those goals” (Coyle, 1997, p. 236). Administrators who are true instructional leaders do not allow their work in the office to remain separate from what goes on in the classrooms. By breaking down barriers, school principals help their more resistant teachers understand that leadership for them does not need to remain within the four walls of their classrooms. Lezotte (1997) describes an instructional leader as someone who has broadened their concept of leadership to include all teachers in the building. The reality of this is that in schools where effective teaching and learning are at the forefront of all decisions, administrators expect their teachers to be leaders. These effective principals trust that their teachers know what is in the best interest of students and that their teachers are committed to achieving that very goal. As Lambert (2003b) acknowledged, “High leadership capacity schools provide teachers with opportunities for skillful participation, which in turn allows their leadership skills to flourish” (p. 33).

Furthermore, high capacity builders believe in teacher leadership as “a central purpose of the school” (Barth, 2001, p. 448). If the formal leader in a school has as their vision that all teachers are expected to lead, and if the administrator clearly articulates that vision, teacher leadership is more likely to occur.
Collective Leadership

The last concept identified as central to teacher leadership is collective leadership. Although this notion has been previously discussed in relation to mentoring, peer coaching, learning teams and instructional leadership, it must be further defined in this section on professional learning communities (PLC’s). While PLC’s incorporate all of the ideas mentioned previously, DuFour & Eaker (1998) identify six specific characteristics of successful professional learning communities meant to support teacher leadership. First, the organization must have a shared mission and vision because quality teaching and learning occur from a shared understanding of goals. Central to the idea of collective leadership is the idea that these goals and visions are not developed in isolation, but rather as a stakeholder group. Second, members of PLC’s are relentless in questioning the status quo, seeking new methods, testing those methods, and then reflecting on the results. Collective inquiry is central to the work of PLC’s. Third, collaborative team learning does not mean the same as team building. Collaborative team learning focuses on organizational renewal and improvements, and a willingness to work together in this continuous change process. Fourth, action orientation and experimentation are evidenced in that members of PLC’s are not only willing to act when necessary, but they are unwilling to tolerate inaction from their colleagues. Fifth, continuous improvement is a primary focus. PLC’s discuss teaching and learning using four key questions that lie at the heart of continuous improvement. These key questions are: What is our fundamental purpose? What do we hope to achieve? What are our strategies for becoming better? What criteria will we use to assess our
improvement efforts? Finally, PLC’s are results focused. All efforts are evaluated on the basis of results rather than on merely intentions. Any school leader looking to minimize the feelings of teacher isolation that can so often occur in education can use the prescriptive nature of DuFour and Eaker’s PLC’s to move their staff towards professional collaboration and meaningful dialogue about teaching and learning.

**Constraints and Challenges to Realizing Teacher Leadership**

All of the central ideas found in Harris and Muijs’ definition - professional collaboration, quality teaching and learning, and collective leadership - seem reasonable, achievable and would pave the way for the establishment of a culture of teacher leadership. What then are the constraints that may surround the implementation of such ideas? What stands in the way of educators? What challenges could be realized when the concept of teacher leadership is misunderstood?

Barth (2001) identifies three obstacles to teacher leadership. The first obstruction is the fact that teachers are extremely busy. Year after year teachers take on more and more responsibilities without ever giving any ‘job’ away. Adding yet another responsibility, teacher leadership, to an already hectic workload seems unrealistic, overwhelming and unachievable. Ponder this quote from a teacher, “When was the last time someone said to me, ‘You are no longer responsible for…?’ It’s always an add-on” (Barth, 2001, p. 446). Taken in this context, although teacher leadership may seem desirable, it is understandable when teachers choose to focus on their teaching rather than on opportunities to lead.
The second issue is that of financial resources. It is not an unusual occurrence for some teachers to have the time to devote to being a teacher leader, however, they may expect additional pay to accompany additional responsibilities. The reality of this situation is that often there are no extra funds available to schools for this purpose. Schools are constrained by the budgets they are given so unless teachers are willing to take on informal leadership roles in the absence of monetary compensation, building leadership capacity may be hampered.

The final obstacle mentioned by Barth (2001) is that of colleagues. “Many teachers report that the greatest obstacle to their leadership comes from colleagues” (p. 447). Teacher leaders may encounter resistance from their colleagues which may then discourage them from taking on further roles. This resistance may result from sheer envy, a lack of agreement on the colleagues’ part that the teacher leader is indeed the best qualified for the task, or unwillingness on the part of colleagues to take on more responsibilities than they already have. Such resistance may lead to colleagues refusing to assist the teacher leader or strained feelings which could ultimately affect the cohesiveness of the staff.

Several other issues associated with teacher leadership are cited by Blase & Blase (2001). They claim that at times teachers see their involvement in school-wide decisions as a facade. “In other words, they believe participation in decision making is often made available as a way for them to vent their frustrations although they have little or no real impact on decision outcomes” (p. 17). When teachers feel that administration is simply providing them with opportunities to offer ideas because they
have to, teachers are less likely to become enthused about sharing contributions in the future. True teacher involvement must be genuine or teachers will see through the pretense and retreat. Also, teachers are busy people who do not always want involvement in “administrative decisions that they see as detractors from their classroom work” (Blase & Blase, 2001, p. 17). So often there is only enough time to do the bare necessities of classroom work, and other decisions, ones that do not directly affect what teachers are doing in their classrooms tomorrow, become less important.

Many of the structures necessary for teacher leadership to succeed can be categorized as organizational structures or resources. When teachers are expected to take on leadership roles in the absence of time to do so, teaching and learning will not improve to the degree that they would if teachers had the necessary in-school time to accomplish their reflecting and inquiry. Intentionally planning for peer coaching, mentoring, team learning, and professional collaboration to occur within the scheduled school day revitalizes conversations. Bringing teachers together after school to do their learning and leading has been for the most part proven the most ineffective time for these discussions. Teachers are tired after a school day and as a result, they may not come to a learning situation ready to actively engage and participate. Instead, teachers may feel that if they do not participate the meeting will end sooner allowing them to go home earlier.

One last obstacle to the successful realization of teacher leadership within a school culture is the notion of change. Fullan (2001) has identified several factors associated with change that must be understood by administrators in order for true
change to occur. The most important factor to consider is that a checklist never accompanies change. Instead, change is always complex without a prescriptive answer. There is no recipe, magic solution, or step-by-step guide to make change less messy.

Leaders often feel vulnerable to seek the off-the-shelf solutions due to their discomfort with chaos and ambiguity. There is no easy way to evoke change, and leaders must be prepared to work their way through their own change process in their own way because each situation is unique. Good changes are not revolutionary, but rather an evolutionary process that allows for the change to be sustained over time. Change brings discomfort and, as Fullan (2001) stated, “unsettling processes provide the best route to greater all-round coherence. In other words, the most powerful coherence is a function of having worked through the ambiguities and complexities of hard-to-solve problems” (p. 116).

The school-based administrator’s job then becomes one of managing the disturbance in the hopes of creating coherence throughout the change process. Due to the fact that working through change can be such a challenge, many administrators choose to remain with the status quo rather than delving into the messiness that can accompany transformation. It is important for those in formal leadership roles to remember that true professional learning communities are never satisfied with the status quo. Change is a part of the daily life of professionals seeking continual school improvement.

In order for any change to be successful, all stakeholders, including teachers, must participate in the change process. Teachers need to ‘buy in’ and take ownership of the changes that are taking place in their schools, and true ownership can only be
cultivated through genuine involvement. School leaders must listen to their teachers throughout the change process and provide staff with opportunities for active participation and problem solving. Simply asking for teachers’ advice when a solution has been predetermined by administration will not promote change, but it may certainly spark resistance. Teachers need to feel motivated by the results of their participation in order to have the desire to participate in future changes. If their efforts are subdued, change may occur, but it will be a top-down change that forces compliance rather than sustaining the results schools are looking for.

**From Theory to Practice – The Southwood Model**

The research clearly indicates that in theory, employing the many facets of teacher leadership “applies the distinctive power of teaching to shape meaning for children, youth, and adults. And it contributes to long-term, enhanced quality of community life” (Crowther et. al., 2002, p. 10). As the school’s principal, these are the precise outcomes I would hope to realize by applying the theory of teacher leadership within the culture and ‘business’ of educating students at Foundations for the Future Charter Academy (FFCA) - Southwood Campus.

FFCA is an organization who shows value for teacher leaders within their mission, stating, “To provide a safe and caring environment where academic excellence, character development, parental involvement and staff leadership are fostered and valued” (FFCA, 2007). With a clear vision for teacher leadership set by our organization, and shared by myself as the formal leader of the school, I find that I am able to formulate an expectation of teacher leadership at my school level.
With this mission as my guide, and an increased emphasis on site based management and the development of our school as a learning community, it is my responsibility to review the literature and then to help teachers to construct leadership environments that would promote professional growth, both individually and collectively. With the end result being improved student learning, it makes the comparison of theory and practice a worthwhile venture in my formal leadership role.

In understanding the three key concepts encased in Harris and Muijs’ (2003) definition of teacher leadership, my journey of theory to practice begins in examining how the facets of professional collaboration, quality teaching and learning, and collective leadership are engrained into our daily lives at Southwood. I share Little’s (1998) belief in stating that, “Teacher leaders thrive when they feel respected for their knowledge and experience” (as cited in Lattimer, 2007, p. 70). So for me, as supported by the research of Linda Lambert (2003b), the first step in developing teacher leaders is to develop the culture that will support their endeavors. Positive, trusting relationships are key to the success of implementing the structures to support the establishment and growth of teacher leaders. In his research, Donaldson Jr., tells us that the power of these relationships influence the adults in a school to want to do good things for the students. In his words, “Great schools grow when educators understand that the power of their leadership lies in the strength of their relationship. Strong leadership in schools results from the participation of many people, each leading in his or her own way” (Donaldson Jr., 2007, p. 29). Ultimately, my role is crucial in fostering the conditions that facilitate teacher leadership at Southwood Campus.
It is Danielson (2007) who aptly identifies some conditions that must be present in a school culture to promote teacher leadership that stem beyond simply my beliefs as the formal leader of the school. It is her assumption that not every school culture is hospitable to the emergence of teacher leaders. By comparison, the culture at Southwood Campus exhibits the conditions she speaks of in providing a safe environment in which staff can feel free to take risks, in having a formal leader who is committed to cultivating teacher leaders, and a formal leader who honors teachers who step forward into informal leadership opportunities. The importance of recognizing teacher leaders may best be understood by the sentiments shared in a task force report for 21st century schools. It stated, “Mischaracterized though they often are as incompetent know-nothings, teachers are paradoxically, also widely viewed as . . . indispensable but unappreciated leaders in the truest meaning of the word. It would be difficult to find a more authentic but unacknowledged example of leadership in modern life” (Gabriel, 2005, p. 2). It is also my belief, as Danielson (2007) states, “If teacher leaders are to emerge and make their full contribution, they need opportunities to learn the necessary skills of curriculum planning, instructional improvement, assessment design, collaboration and facilitation” (p. 19). Part of being a leader of leaders is to provide instructional support to improve their professional learning, and then to find occasions to celebrate these accomplishments.

With every effort made on my part to cultivate a culture designed to support informal leadership, what does the overall picture of teacher leadership look like at Southwood Campus? Our year begins with a professional conversation about how ‘we’
are going to support quality teaching and learning at our campus. It is during this
dialogue that staff are keenly aware that I strongly support the FFCA mission in regards
to informal leadership and would welcome opportunities to help promote the ‘passions’
of my staff. If they would like to learn more about assessment and to share that learning
with colleagues, then they may want to become a part of the school Assessment
Committee; if they want to learn more about the writing focus that we have as a part of
our school goals, then that individual may want to become a part of the Writing
Committee to advance their learning and then to share that with the other staff. The
development of school committees to advance our own learning, and to promote the
passions of individual staff members, has proven very fruitful for the cultivation of
teacher leaders.

In wanting to build a culture for high capacity leadership I eagerly support each
group in their own learning through providing professional development opportunities
to do so. The expectation with this gift of time to learn is that their professional
development will impact the existing teaching practices of staff in pursuit of our school
goals, and then subsequently their learning would enhance the learning of our students.
Success of this learning and leading organizational structure is evident with our staff
providing seven sessions at the upcoming FFCA conference for all teachers across the
jurisdiction. My teachers have become so excited about what they have learned and the
impact that they have seen with their students that they now want to share that success
with their colleagues from other campuses. A shared belief in life long learning at
Southwood Campus supports the ideals of Lezotte (1997) in that we are all instructional
leaders in our building with a concern for enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in support of our learning goals.

That said, school based learning committees are not the only structure that are intentionally planned for at Southwood Campus to promote professional conversations in support of teacher leadership. My job in implementing the remaining structures to facilitate leadership within my staff are made easier in the organizational beliefs that FFCA has in regards to mentorship, peer coaching and learning teams. Mentorship for new staff begins in our organization before any staff arrives for a new year at school with a full week of orientation activities at our FFCA Teacher Orientation Program.

It is during this week of planned sessions that new staff is introduced to an individual in the organization who will be available to help them plan and deliver program in a specific subject area. Lipton and Wellman (2003) remind us that, “From the first day on the job, brand new teachers are expected to perform essentially the same tasks as experienced veterans” (p. ix), and our experience has taught us that without a formal mentor to support these new teachers, the protégé’s are reluctant to ask anyone for help in fear that they may seem incompetent. Our mandate with teacher induction at the jurisdictional level is to support the learnings of our new teachers as we are well aware that, “research indicates that teacher orientation programs reduce the intensity of transition into teaching, improve teacher effectiveness, and increase the retention of a greater number of qualified teachers (Huling-Austin, 1987, Schaffer et al., 1992)” (as cited in FFCA, 2009a).
The organizational mentorship program is further complimented at Southwood with new teachers being inducted into grade level teams. It is our expectation that grade level partners build a supportive network as mentors with their new protégés. The goal of grade level mentors is to establish a learning focused relationship that will allow the new staff to “increase efficacy as problem-solvers and decision-makers” (Lipton & Wellman, 2003, p. 1), as well as providing opportunities for meaningful dialogue to support the protégé in continually trying to improve their professional practice. The time for these learning teams to come together for professional learning conversations and collective reflections is further supported by me with grade level meeting time at least twice a month in lieu of scheduled ‘all staff’ staff meetings and further time built into professional development days throughout the year.

The second structure that is organizationally supported through FFCA policy is that of peer coaching. “Coaches are a staff development resource providing supportive supervision to teachers in the implementation of FFCA’s unique programs, methodologies and initiatives. The primary role of the coach, in concert, with the Principal Educator, is to increase student performance through enhancing teacher practices” (FFCA, 2009b). In an effort to make instructional coaching effective and meaningful for our staff at Southwood, we initiated a process whereby our coaches are self proclaimed ‘area’ specialists who generally sit on one of our school committees with a particular learning focus and “have the ability to communicate clearly, build relationships, and support fellow teachers” (Knight, 2007, p. 57). Staff are then required as a part of their yearly individual growth plan to explain what ‘area’ that they would
like to receive additional support in through our coaching program. An example of this may be that a staff member identifies the integration of technology into their science program as an area of professional learning for the year. As a part of my professional conversation with them about their learning plan, I would suggest the ‘technology coach’ that we have as a person who could help them to improve their professional practice and to help meet their individual learning goals for the year. Staff will start of the year with one coach, and may at a point later in the year, initiate a conversation to incorporate a new coaching relationship to support a new area of learning.

With staff intentionally planning for their own instructional coaching experience, we have rarely seen the turbulence and waves of resistance that Knight (2007) reminds us can occur when coaches and teachers are uncertain of their goals, priorities or practices. During the course of the year, I meet with our ‘coaches’ to dialogue about their experiences and to enhance their abilities to provide the support that staff are seeking from them. At the end of each year, we survey staff to see what has gone well with our program and what we can do to improve for the following year. It is important for us that the peer coaching program be a genuine and meaningful experience for all, and that our coaches feel that their voices have been heard in refining the program to meet learning needs of our staff.

One of the final structures central to Harris and Muijs’ definition of teacher leadership is collective leadership. As established earlier, collective leadership is further defined from the context of professional learning communities (PLC’s). At Southwood Campus, collective leadership is very much tied to our grade level learning teams.
Through examining their Programs of Study in developing a coordinated program direction, to reviewing assessment and evaluation techniques, our grade level teams embark collectively on a reflective journey. As a part of these continual learning conversations our staff may or may not utilize the four key questions provide by DuFour and Eaker (1998) for the systematic workings of a true PLC. It is from experiencing the learning conversations of our grade level teams that I question whether or not these professional conversations, a crucial component of collaborative leadership, can only be achieved through the systematic framework of a professional learning community. Tara Fenwick (1998) goes beyond questioning just the framework of a PLC in support of staff leadership in questioning the whole ideal of the learning organization. It is her contention that, “the learning organization discourse presents itself as a romantic ideal encouraging workers’ personal growth and imaginative engagement – yet this discourse continues the workplace tradition of dictating which kind of growth counts most, what imaginative endeavors are most valued, what kinds of talk, relationships and identities are allowed and which are our of bounds or even meaningless” (p. 152). So while I cannot fully support that a framework for PLC’s is the only means of achieving collaborative leadership, I also cannot accept Fenwick’s notion that a learning organization cannot be supportive of individual and collective learning goals.

So what does collaborative leadership mean at Southwood Campus as a way of promoting teacher leadership? “Matthews (1999) suggests that the development of a community of learners into a learning organization is the ultimate goal of workplace learning” (as cited in Bratton et.al., 2004, p. 75). This, too, is the goal for our school so
collaborative leadership means that our teachers have ongoing conversations about teaching and learning in grade level teams, as a whole staff, or as a part of a dialogue with a colleague, mentor or coach. “When teachers regularly discuss such topics as student achievement data, curriculum mapping, classroom visitations, and lesson planning, teacher leaders arise organically from within the community” (Lattimer, 2007, p. 71). The multitude of teacher leaders that exist within our campus is not due to our ability to have successfully adopted all facets of the PLC. Our successes stem from our ability and commitment as the leader of leaders to support collective collaborative conversations within a professional teaching community. Our structure is not a ‘romantic ideal’, quite simply we are a community of learners in a learning organization. “Colleagues recognize their peers’ strengths and seek to strengthen the community by building on each individual’s gifts” (Lattimer, 2007, p. 71).

The processes and structures that currently exist at Southwood to support teacher leadership did not resemble what they are today without some setbacks along the way and some valuable lessons learned. It is wonderful to work with a group of professionals who love to share their learning with others, however, as the principal I have learned that to expect too much from any one individual will produce the opposite culture to support teacher leadership than what I would have hoped for. Through placing the expectation on teachers to take on leadership roles without giving considerable thought to the structures necessary to support my teachers, I found that what I was seeking was not what was forming. Those who engaged in the leadership opportunities felt tired and stressed because they saw their work as something
additional to their classroom role. The rest of the staff ‘read’ this atmosphere and soon were not responding to professional conversations in the same meaningful way. Fortunately for me, I had the relationship with my staff where they were able to share concerns with me for the level of expectation I had. Through my own personal reflection and review of literature, I worked collaboratively with my staff to change the how, who, and why for teacher leadership at Southwood. While Fullan assures us that change is a messy process, it is also imperative for change to occur in such a way that those involved in the process feel they have a voice in the outcomes. “The more aware teachers become of their capacity to drive change, the more likely it is that deep change will occur” (Reason & Reason, 2007, p. 36). It was this knowledge that allowed us to work through our change process to achieve a positive outcome and deeper commitment to the growth and work of teacher leaders at our school.

If I have learned one valuable insight through my comparison of theory and practice of teacher leadership, it would simply be that “from little acorns, big oak trees can grow” (Crowther et. al., 2002, p. 69) ultimately guaranteeing healthy growth for the teachers currently on our staff and those yet to come. Through this introspective examination, I am pleased that the practical aspects of teacher leadership exist in support of the teaching and learning at Southwood Campus. I am also comforted that in my school, leadership does not need to look like administration to extend beyond the classroom. The group of professionals that exists within our culture is eager to continue the journey of life long learning and sharing in hopes that there will be improved
student learning for all of our kids. That said, ours is a journey of continual school
improvement for I do not believe that we have fully arrived.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Encouraging and promoting teacher leadership can improve teaching and
learning. School-based administrators that embrace leadership capacity will constantly
look for ways to empower their teachers by providing them with the structures
necessary for success. Lambert (1998) outlines a practical conceptual framework for
school leaders to use when beginning the process of increasing leadership capacity. The
key points of the framework are that leaders need to hire personnel with the capacity to
do the leadership work. They must also assess staff and school capacity for leadership,
develop a culture of inquiry and organize the school community for leadership work.
School leaders need to develop and implement plans for building leadership capacity
just as school jurisdictions should develop policies and practices that support leadership
capacity building.

“The structure of an organization is founded upon its policies, procedures, rules,
and relationships. The culture of an organization is founded upon the assumptions,
beliefs, values, and habits that constitute the norms for that organization – norms that
shape how its people think, feel, and act” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 131). If schools align
their organization and culture with ideas connected to teacher leadership, the
possibilities associated with developing leadership capacity in schools are infinite.
Teacher leaders in schools can take on a multitude of roles from curriculum developer,
to mentor, peer coach, learning team leader, and expert teacher. The collaboration and
collegiality fostered through teacher leadership will enhance the school’s capacity for change and improvement. As well, the teacher leader’s own efficacy and the entire staff’s level of morale will be bolstered. Ultimately, teachers who work collaboratively and who are provided the structures suggested for success in teacher leadership are more likely to remain in the profession because they feel valued and supported in their work (Harris & Muijs, 2003).

Teacher leadership is also fundamental in improving student performance, and in securing a learning community within the school. Teachers who are involved in leadership opportunities merge their lives and work with “passion, meaning, and purpose” (Bolman & Deal, 1994, p.3). Also, “teacher leadership is essential for raising the level of professionalism within the teaching profession itself” (Mayo, 2002, p. 29). Finally, teacher leaders are often given the occasion to be involved in “rich and diverse opportunities for continuous professional development” (Harris, 2003, p. 320) that would inevitably improve the quality of instruction. These same teacher leaders strengthen their self-confidence as they learn to be leaders through engaging in “trialing new teaching approaches, disseminating their findings to colleagues and engaging in action research” (Harris, 2003, p. 320).

Although change can be daunting, the rewards associated with teacher leadership are worth the undertaking. Through purposeful and organized professional development, the building of relationships, professional conversation and reflection, and opportunities for experts to do their jobs in meaningful, genuine and collaborative ways, school-based administrators can begin the process of building leadership capacity
within their schools. As teachers come to feel more valued and appreciated, their performance in their own classrooms will improve, ultimately enhancing their student’s learning.

School leaders concerned with quality teaching and learning cannot help but explore the myriad of opportunities available when the principles of teacher leadership are fully embraced. Schools can excel when the professionals charged with the work of educating children are trusted to do their jobs, and are recognized for the efforts they put into their daily work with colleagues, students and parents. As formal school leaders our job is not simply about asking whether teachers are ready for their new leadership roles, it has become about intentionally planning for opportunities to let teacher leaders shine. “By helping good teachers become great leaders, we plant seeds that will enhance our profession and enable students to reap the reward they deserve – a high quality education” (Dozier, 2007, p. 58). Is there any greater gift that a school administrator could give?
References


