The Teacher Leader: Improving Schools by Building Social Capital through Shared Leadership

By Judith S. Nappi

Is a strong leader with exceptional skills the answer to the daunting task of transforming or improving schools? The author argues that, despite the documented value of skilled leadership, in today's educational and financial climate the school principal cannot go solo. School and student success are more likely to occur when distributed or shared leadership is practiced. The need to attract and retain quality teachers is another reason to extend the role of the teacher to domains outside of the classroom walls. The author focuses on distributed or shared leadership as a facet of social capital, a driving force in the success of teacher leadership.

For many years policymakers and educators alike have thought that a strong leader with exceptional skills was the answer to the daunting task of transforming or improving schools. Research has strongly indicated that the leadership of the school principal plays a critical role in the development of successful schools (Glanz, Shulman, & Sullivan, 2007; Purkey & Smith, 1983). Principals set the tone for the building, work to develop and carry out school goals, guide instruction, develop the budget, and lead the charge for student success. However, one need not look far to realize that this concept in its purest form has not come to fruition. School principals and other administrators are often expected to fix all the problems schools face, yet one might pose the question as to the feasibility of this notion; certainly Chief Executive Officers of successful corporations surround themselves with experts in a variety of fields. Skilled leadership is an important factor in school and student success; however, in today's educational and financial climate, no matter how skilled the school principal, he or she cannot go solo. School and student success are more likely to occur when distributed or shared leadership is practiced.

Distributed or shared leadership implies a more cooperative view of influence and authority and is a shift from the belief that leadership is a unique characteristic that an individual has developed. Gronn (2002) found that when people collaborate and share their efforts and base of knowledge, the outcome is greater than the aggregate of their efforts as individuals. In addition, distributed leadership increases the pool of leaders or potential leaders for an organization—in this case, a school.

Andrews and Lewis (2004) believed shared or distributed leadership to be a form of synchronous leadership where teacher leaders work with principal leaders, in different but compatible means, towards shared goals. The notion of teachers as leaders is not new,
however. In 1986, a report funded by the Carnegie Foundation for Advancement of Teaching suggested that districts denote individuals who could model teaching methodologies for other teachers. In addition, due to their daily work and interactions with students, teachers are in a prime position to make decisions regarding the teaching and learning process and apply change thoroughly and consistently (Howey, 1988; Livingston, 1992). The need to attract and retain quality teachers is another reason to extend the role of the teacher to domains outside of the classroom walls as “isolation is a primary reason that new teachers leave” (Heller, 2004, p. 6). This article focuses on distributed or shared leadership as a facet of social capital, a driving force in the success of teacher leadership.

**Who Are Teacher Leaders and What Do They Do?**

Teacher leaders are (usually) classroom teachers who share their expertise in myriad forms. Danielson (2006) wrote that teacher leadership is a “set of skills demonstrated by teachers who continue to teach students but also have an influence that extends beyond their own classrooms to others within their own school and elsewhere” (p. 12). Sometimes teacher leaders are formally designated as such and may have the title of teacher leader or another title that focuses on his or her expertise, such as data coach; in other instances, teacher leader is not an assigned position but a role taken on by the individual. The realm of educational leadership has been broadly researched. However, the role of teacher as leader remains largely undefined because teachers take part in varying activities and roles that involve leadership. For example, Sherrill (1999) suggested that teacher-leaders are “clinical faculty, clinical educators, teachers-in-residence, master teachers, lead teachers, and clinical supervisors” (p. 57), while Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, and Hann (2002) viewed teacher leaders as individuals who are “aspiring to lead school reform” (p. 5). Killion and Harrison (2006) defined ten roles of teacher leaders:

- Resource Provider
- Instructional Specialist
- Curriculum Specialist
- Classroom Supporter
- Learning Facilitator
- Mentor
- School Leader
- Data Coach
- Catalyst for Change
- Learner

All of the teacher-leader roles identified indicate that the function of teacher leader is far-reaching and varied. The identified roles also suggest that leadership responsibilities are distributed and do not rely on one individual. In addition, all of the acknowledged roles require that the teacher leader collaborate with others in order to share his or her expertise.

Judith S. Nappi, EdD, is currently an assistant professor of Educational Leadership at Rider University. Previously she was the Assistant Superintendent/Director of Curriculum and Instruction for the Manchester Township School District in Ocean County, New Jersey. Nappi also held positions as a principal, grade-level administrator, and teacher. She has degrees in psychology, social sciences, educational administration, and administrative policy and urban education. Nappi is currently a member of Omicron Chapter in Alpha Zeta State Organization (NJ), jsstegmaiern@rider.edu
thereby utilizing individual capital to develop and strengthen social capital. Social capital can be defined as combined assets that can be shared in a supportive environment where group members have common goals (Dika & Singh, 2002).

School districts often call in experts from outside the school or the school district to improve student performance. Yet, teachers have a pragmatic understanding of the needs of the school and the school community that outsiders frequently do not. In addition, outside consultants and teaching experts often do not have experience in education or public schools (Leana, 2013). Having an understanding of the needs of the school and school community allows the teacher(s) to implement practices that target the specific needs of the students and the school. In addition, encouraging professionals to participate in school leadership alters the perception of ownership in that the feeling of ownership increases when teachers become part of the decision-making process. According to Donaldson (2001), “In a school where every adult is both shaper and shaped,’ each person owns a share of influence and responsibility, not just over her individual job but over school-wide concerns as well” (p. 41). Donaldson also cited a necessity for schools to allow teachers leadership experiences outside of the classroom in order to expand their knowledge base through interacting with others. These leadership opportunities increase a teacher’s scope of effectiveness or social capital, which focuses on the relationships among teachers.

The Power of Teacher Leaders: Building on Intellectual Capital for the Common Good

Teachers possess a variety of experiences, attributes, and abilities. In their seminal work, Belasco and Stayer (1993) described the different abilities that members of any organization possess as intellectual capital and examined the paradigm shift in leadership from one individual leading to everyone having a role in the leadership process. Effective organizations build upon the innate intellectual capital as employees (teachers) are more familiar with the formal and informal power structure than the leader (principal; Donaldson, 2001). Because teachers possess different abilities, it is natural that teachers will collaborate and, generally, teachers collaborate with one another; they do not collaborate with the principal or outside experts (Leana, 2013). For example, if a teacher is having discipline problems in the classroom, he or she might ask a teacher with excellent classroom management skills for advice, or a teacher having difficulty with presenting a concept might ask a teacher who excels in methodology for assistance. This intellectual capital, when fostered through collaboration, can result in a productive social capital.

Allowing teachers to take on leadership roles not only has an impact on their classrooms and the school, but also supplies the school with professionals who may eventually take on formal roles in educational leadership. Effective organizations have a healthy culture that is sustained through leadership that is consistent in nature. Development of teacher leaders will assist in providing the school with human resources that will uphold the vision, mission, and goals of the school (Collins & Porras, 1994). Buchen (2000) argued that "the only leadership that will make a difference is that of teachers. They alone are positioned where all the fulcrums are for change. They alone know what the day-to-day problems are and what it takes to solve them" (p. 35). He further stated, “They, not the principals, should be the ones to hire new teachers. They know what is needed” (p. 35).

The competencies and knowledge required of teacher leaders are identified in The Teacher Leader Model Standards (Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, 2011). For school and district leaders who are looking to put teacher leaders in place, the Standards give some thoughts for implementation, as well as strategies for supporting teacher leaders.
The diverse characteristics of teacher leadership are outlined in the seven domains of the Standards:

- Domain I: Fostering a collaborative culture to support educator development and student learning;
- Domain II: Accessing and using research to improve practice and student learning;
- Domain III: Promoting professional learning for continuous improvement;
- Domain IV: Facilitating improvements in instruction and student learning;
- Domain V: Promoting the use of assessments and data for school and district improvement;
- Domain VI: Improving outreach and collaboration with families and community;
- Domain VII: Advocating for student learning and the profession. (p. 9)

The Standards can also be used as a guide when creating professional development in order to provide programs designed to enhance the skills and knowledge of teacher leaders, once again building upon an individual's intellectual capital for the greater good.

In order for teacher leaders to be successful, school principals must take advantage of the strengths or intellectual capital of these leaders. Using the intellectual capital of an individual teacher is important, and Donaldson (2001) supported nurturing of leadership skills in teachers as well as increasing opportunities for collaboration. By increasing opportunities for collaboration, administrators increase their social capital, which is important to schools desiring an increase in student achievement. For example, a study conducted by Leana (2011) found a positive correlation between math scores and the number of teacher conversations with colleagues that centered on math conducted in an environment of trust:

> Teacher social capital was a significant predictor of student achievement gains above and beyond teacher experience or ability in the classroom. And the effects of teacher social capital on student performance were powerful. If a teacher’s social capital was just one standard deviation higher than the average, her students' math scores increased by 5.7 percent. (p. 33)

Although traditional responsibilities such as ordering supplies, maintaining an inventory, and acting as a liaison between the administration and faculty are important, an administrator who limits teacher leaders to these responsibilities can be thwarting the success of the school. School leaders have to recognize the positive aspects of having teacher leaders and be willing to give up some perceived power and not be threatened by a teacher leader’s influence or leadership qualities. In transformational schools, administrators rely on teacher leaders to maintain a positive school culture, assist other teachers in implementing best practices, and improve student achievement (Weller, 2001).

In order to be a successful teacher leader, an individual must have the ability to communicate with administrators, teachers, and other staff members. Communication is the key to translating intellectual capital into social capital through shared leadership. Making connections within the school community is an essential ingredient for success. Teacher leaders must also be able to navigate resistance that can, and most likely will, arise when teacher leaders are working with administrators in order to create a sense of collaboration and healthy school environment or culture.

**The Benefits of Having Teacher Leaders in Schools**

The most obvious benefit of having teacher leaders in schools is that they can lessen the burden on the school principal. This is not to be confused with reducing the work load
of the principal; the point is to shift the principal's focus from managerial leadership to instructional leadership. Teacher leaders can take responsibility for making decisions on day-to-day activities within the school, thereby freeing the principal to engage in activities that will improve instruction, such as teacher observations, walk-throughs, professional development, and so forth. The types of activities that teacher leaders engage in must be agreed upon with administrators. Teacher leaders can assume managerial aspects of leadership, such as selecting textbooks or budgeting for a department, as well as instructional aspects of leadership, such as providing professional development for teachers, leading professional learning communities, and assisting new teachers.

Perhaps less obvious is the impact teacher leaders have on student achievement. Empirical research conducted by Walters et al. (2003) indicated that 33% of variation in school level achievement is related to the teacher. Louis et al. (2010) found that shared leadership has a greater impact on student achievement than individual leadership. The Wallace Foundation's 10-year study (2010) related to improving educational leadership found that student achievement was higher in schools that garnered input from key stakeholders, including teachers, and in schools where shared leadership was practiced. The researchers in the study also found that professional communities were encouraged in schools with shared leadership, and, when teachers were involved with professional communities, they were more likely to implement best practices associated with an increase in student achievement.

Shared leadership may also lessen the negative impact of principal turnover. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) found that principal turnover is most successful when the principal leaves a heritage of shared leadership as this will most likely guarantee that the initiatives designed and implemented to improve student achievement will be preserved. Therefore, it would be desirable to develop social capital within a school by fostering teacher leaders through shared leadership practices in order to sustain the school's mission as well as goals and purpose.

**Summary**

In today's educational and financial climate, the school principal clearly cannot go solo. School and student success are virtually impossible without the use of distributed or shared leadership. Distributed or shared leadership is a shift from the belief that leadership is a unique characteristic that an individual has developed to a belief that teachers have a pragmatic understanding of the needs of the school and the school community as well as individual sets of skills and knowledge—their intellectual capital. When principals share leadership responsibilities and allow teachers to take on leadership roles, the type of collaboration that follows results in productive social capital, which in turn increases the scope of effectiveness of the professional community.

**References**


