

# The Role of Teacher Leaders in Supporting Effective Teaching

Charlotte Danielson

[charlotte@danielsongroup.org](mailto:charlotte@danielsongroup.org)

[www.danielsongroup.org](http://www.danielsongroup.org)

# Let's Start with the Premises

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- Teaching is extraordinarily complex work
- Teaching is a “flat” profession; if teachers seek additional challenge, they must become administrators
- The principalship has become impossible
- Teacher tenure in many schools is longer than that of administrators; they hold the institutional memory

# The Complexity of Teaching

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“After 30 years of doing such work, I have concluded that classroom teaching ... is perhaps the most complex, most challenging, and most demanding, subtle, nuanced, and frightening activity that our species has ever invented. ..The only time a physician could possibly encounter a situation of comparable complexity would be in the emergency room of a hospital during or after a natural disaster”

Lee Shulman, *The Wisdom of Practice*

# The “Impossible” Principalsip

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- The principal is the “point person” for accountability
- Range of conceptualizations of the principalsip indicate its complexity: technical, managerial, transformational, personal, professional
- Enormous bureaucratic and administrative requirements
- Multiple stakeholders
- Cannot be expert in everything

# Teacher Leadership Can Address All These Issues

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First, what is leadership:

“The litmus test of all leadership is whether it mobilises people’s commitment to putting their energy into actions designed to improve things. It is individual commitment, but above all it is collective mobilisation.”

Michael Fullan

*Leading in a Culture of Change*, p. 9

# Structures for Teacher Leadership

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Two fundamental approaches:

- Formal leadership roles
- Informal leadership, exercised by individual teachers on their own initiative

# Formal Teacher Leadership Roles

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- Team leader
- Department chair
- Content specialist
- Helping teacher
- Instructional coach
- Curriculum coordinator

For these roles, teachers are appointed, and they generally must leave their classrooms.

# Informal Teacher Leadership: What it is

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Initiative in matters of purpose and practice. Leadership may be exercised in promoting change, or simply in improving teaching and learning.

# Informal Teacher Leadership: What it is not

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- Management of large-scale change
- Administrative or managerial leadership
- Shared decision-making
- Distributed leadership
- Career ladder
- Supervision or evaluation

# A Fundamental Question to Consider

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This question applies only to formal leadership roles:

- Do the individuals who hold these positions exercise supervisory responsibilities over their colleagues?

# Contributors to Professional Learning

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- An environment of trust
- Self-assessment
- Reflection on practice
- Professional conversation
- A culture of professional inquiry

*“It’s all about the conversation”*

# Strengthening Effective Teaching

## What's Needed?

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Joint learning within a culture of inquiry,  
informed by knowledge and understanding,  
through professional conversation

In other words, building capacity for improved  
practice

# Activities for Professional Inquiry

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- Joint curriculum or unit planning
- Lesson study
- Action research; either collective or individual and sharing the results with colleagues
- Analyzing student work
- Observing in one another's classrooms
- Sharing findings from action research

# Knowledge for Teacher Leadership

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- Focus on results: formal, informal
- Curriculum planning
  - balance of outcomes: knowledge, reasoning
  - coordination
  - integration
- Assessment
  - formative
  - summative
- Instruction
  - teaching for engagement
  - specific strategies, e.g., questioning skills

# Skills of Teacher Leadership

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- Collaboration skills
- Facilitation skills
  - presenting a new idea
  - leading a discussion
  - keeping a group on track
  - clarifying, mediating, summarizing
- Planning skills
  - problem posing or problem finding
  - collecting evidence
  - planning an approach; share tasks
  - taking action, monitoring progress

# Challenges of Teacher Leadership

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- Organizational structures that permit time for collaborative work
- Knowledge and skill on the part of teacher leaders
- Credibility with teacher colleagues
- Delineation of responsibilities between teachers and administrators: “contested ground”
- The “slide” between informal teacher leadership and formal roles

# School Conditions Supporting Teacher Leadership

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- A safe environment for risk-taking
- Administrators not threatened by teacher leaders
- A commitment of administrators to cultivating teacher leadership
- Absence of the “tall poppy” syndrome
- Opportunities for teachers to learn skills and exercise leadership

IN OTHER WORDS, A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING  
COMMUNITY

# Summary of Teacher Leadership

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- Teacher leaders play an important role in school improvement
- Formal teacher leaders are appointed; informal teacher leaders emerge spontaneously
- The conditions and culture must support teacher leaders
- Leadership requires skills, which must be developed