

Cultivating Teacher Leadership in Middle Level Education

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Middle school teachers accomplish tremendous, awe-inspiring tasks everyday. They not only have the abilities to effectively teach but also they possess the capabilities to transform teaching and learning within a school by sharing its leadership (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, & Hann, 2002). Teacher leadership is now considered a professional survival strategy for middle grades teachers (George & Alexander, 2003) and is addressed in three dispositions within Standard 7, Middle Level Professional Roles for masters' candidates in middle grade education programs (NMSA, 2005). Teachers must develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will enable them to participate more fully in leading schools in sustainable and continuous school improvement. Because leadership training is not historically a part of the culture of teaching, teachers tend not to be acculturated into leadership, either in their preparation programs or their practices. In this paper we describe a graduate university course that is intended to help teachers develop skills that will enable them to assume leadership roles and responsibilities in their schools. In this course, graduate students complete both university and site-based clinical activities. In addition to the content, we discuss the theoretical basis of the course and provide selected reflections from teachers who have completed this graduate level curriculum.

National Middle School Association Dispositions and the Literature

Educators support the National Middle School Association (NMSA) (NMSA, 2005) mandate for teachers to develop the knowledge,

skills, and attitudes for leadership. Danielson (1996) states that teacher leadership is one of the core responsibilities of professional practice and teachers have a responsibility to teach and inform colleagues. The third disposition in NMSA Standard 7 (NMSA, 2005) states that middle level teachers should "believe that their professional role includes providing leadership and guidance to prospective and practicing teachers." Part of being empowered and enabled as a teacher leader is to have both access to the information from which school improvement decisions should be made and to have the knowledge and skills to use the information in important and appropriate ways (Jenkins, Zimmerman, & Jenkins, 2006). And yet, teachers often hesitate to inform colleagues because they regard possessing power to be commensurate with position, status, and authority. They must overcome the social stigma of being less important professionals in a school community (Ackerman & Mackenzie, 2006; Barth, 2001; Meier, 1995). Teachers must be proactive and seize opportunities related to power and leadership.

Along with these opportunities comes the potential for teacher renewal and motivation through leadership (Barth, 2001). With additional knowledge, teachers are empowered to take action, develop and use their leadership voice, and share ownership in school decisions and accomplishments. Katzenmeyer and Moeller (2001) assert that teacher efficacy is a desired consequence of teacher leadership, because efficacious teachers participate in the processes of school improvement and community building.

Another reason for sharing leadership is the limited time principals have to deal with numerous tasks. Principals are responsible for instructional, cultural, managerial, human resources, strategic, external development, and micropolitical leadership (Portin, 2004). Principals alone cannot complete all of the tasks required in schools. Sharing these responsibilities with middle grades teachers is supported by the second disposition of NMSA Standard 7 (NMSA, 2005), which states that masters' level students should "believe that their professional responsibilities extend beyond the classroom and school." Teacher leadership is not a natural outgrowth of training and experience. Teachers may be the answer to improved learning and true school change, but unless they take on new challenges outside of their classrooms, they will be limited in their perspectives and thus their ability to assist with school improvements (Ackerman & Mackenzie, 2006). Sustainability of school improvement and school success is also linked to teacher leadership (Chrisman, 2005; Lambert, 1996; 2002).

In developing our course, we also considered a third disposition that masters' level teachers must "perceive themselves as members of the larger learning community." Barth (2001) writes that continual student learning can only occur when teachers view themselves as part of a community of learners. It is no longer acceptable for teachers to retreat into the comfort of isolation. Teachers must be encouraged to gain a greater perspective of the larger picture of an educational setting. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) suggest that leaders must remove themselves from current positions long enough to gain a better perspective. Lambert (2002) asserts that instructional leadership is everyone's work including the whole school community. Additionally, when we encourage collaboration we build a sense of collective responsibility, improve school culture, and accomplish greater student achievement. For successful school improvement to occur, principals must become facilitators who model shared governance and trust that teachers are learners who are prepared to accept more responsibility

(Zimmerman, Jenkins, & Jenkins, 2005). This shared decision making is seen as a first step in school improvement and has been mandated by many states (Katzenmeyer & Moeller, 2001).

The Course

At our university we offer the class "Teacher Leadership and School Improvement" for masters' level teachers. The goal of the course is to prepare middle grades teachers to be proactive and exercise their leadership rather than waiting for someone else to confer the opportunity for leadership on them. Teachers are taught accountability methods, theories of leadership, how to examine school cultures, and professional roles of teachers and administrators. By becoming knowledgeable about school workings outside of their classrooms, teachers are encouraged to act for the common good and to inspire others. Teachers gain a greater frame of reference that helps them to more accurately perceive the education system and its strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, it is very important that activities and major projects for this class take place within a school setting. To maximize the connectedness between theory and real-world settings, instructors pay particular attention to the relationships between teacher leadership, school effectiveness, and site-based accountability while completing the major project in this course.

The course outline consists of six areas including the following: 1) understanding essential principles of effective leadership (strategic leadership and leading people), 2) understanding the characteristics of a professional culture in schools (overview of organizational culture, the nature of professional work, and the professional environment in schools), 3) understanding the effective uses of power, authority, and control (the application of power in schools, authority and control), 4) understanding the relationship between teacher leadership and school-based accountability (accountability and the school as agency of accountability), 5) learning the emerging roles and responsibilities for teacher leaders in schools (governance roles and responsibilities, instructional roles and responsibilities, profes-

sional roles and responsibilities and participation in performance review for marginal teachers), and 6) synthesizing and applying the characteristics of high performing schools (focus on student learning, collaboration, distributed roles and responsibilities and building shared meaning).

This course is delivered as either a face-to-face course, a WebCT class, or a web-assisted course. Readings are accessible through online websites and through an online library reserves site. Readings are continually updated or replaced as new regulations and views on teacher leadership and school improvement are developed (Wayman & Stringfield, 2006; Ackerman & Mackenzie, 2006). Teachers submit completed activities that correlate with the course outline, participate in an online discussion board and plan and implement a final school improvement project. One example of an activity within the course section on professional culture in schools is to create a PowerPoint presentation of at least six slides that define the student's current school culture and then read "Transformative School Culture" (Henderson & Hawthorne, 2000) and "The Culture Builder" (Barth, 2002). Teachers are then asked to revisit their PowerPoint slides and make changes as appropriate from the knowledge they gained from the readings. Activities also include environmental scans, choosing books for teacher book clubs, classroom action research, participant-observer studies, and shadow studies. Several activities require teachers to interview or discuss concepts and opinions with colleagues and administrators to further the teachers' understanding of differing viewpoints. Whether the class is delivered face-to-face or online, close monitoring of activities and constant verbal and written communication between teachers and the instructor is important. This instructor feedback is crucial in furthering student understanding of course concepts such as transformative leadership or assessing student accountability.

Online discussions address teacher beliefs, accountability practices, and critical course concepts. Discussions encourage a network for student collaboration while focusing on relevant school issues. The discussions also create a venue for teachers to practice developing their leadership voices. Teachers are assigned to small dis-

ussion groups. Instructors prompt discussions about the professional responsibilities of teacher leadership such as the concept of culture, reframing organizations, the functions of leadership, principles of teacher education and readiness for leadership. The instructor plays a minimal role in the discussion board as a facilitator to check the discussion focus.

The final project requires teachers to identify schools' deficits and concerns through a needs' assessment and then develop a rationale with a purpose and goals to address the deficits and concerns. Teachers and students must plan a realistic project and implement the project with support and collaboration from faculty, administrators, and in some cases, the community. Documentation, assessment, and reflection are all crucial elements of the required implementation of the project. Students must be certain that their responses to all activities are aligned with educational literature on best practices and a specific school's improvement plan. Instructors use a rubric to evaluate the project.

Student Reflections

Over the years, middle grade teachers have completed a variety of school improvement projects. These projects range from applying and receiving grants for additional technology, developing and providing second language learning programs for parents of Hispanic students, refurbishing computers to give students for home use, and determining how to improve the writing proficiency of eighth grade students as assessed during end-of-grade testing. Teacher reflections of overall success have varied, but positive comments about learning how to plan, collaborate, and implement school improvements are consistently reported. Enhanced vertical curriculum alignment, communication among teachers and parents, improved attitudes of students at-risk for academic failure, the development of positive relationships between students from different cultures, and the integration of visual arts and writing are a few of the successful reported project outcomes. A correlation of NMSA dispositions, sample course assignments and student reflections is reported

in Table 1.

Three middle grade teachers expressed feelings that we often hear at the end of this course (Student reflections, 2004). They reported feeling better about pursuing leadership opportunities, a greater confidence to undertake new things, and increased collaboration with teachers with whom they had never previously worked. Finally, they wrote that they realized their roles within the school and community involved so much more than classroom teaching. These reflections and numerous others substantiate the fact that the course is addressing three disposi-

tions within NMSA Standard 7 (NMSA, 2005) for middle level masters' students.

Conclusions

A key in sustaining developmentally responsive middle schools for young adolescents is to engage teachers in assuming leadership responsibilities. Teachers report validation and renewal through learning about teacher leadership and distributed responsibility. Through school improvement projects, teachers may be recognized as highly effective professionals who can address and make school improvements when taught appropriate avenues for expression. In an

TABLE 1
Correlation of Dispositions, Course Activities and Student Reflections

<i>Standard 7 NMSA Disposition</i>	<i>Sample Course Activity</i>	<i>Student Reflection</i>
2. Perceive themselves as members of the larger learning community.	Arrange to interview an experienced member of your school's improvement team and inquire about how well your school's team dialogues for improvement. Write up a 2-page summary of your interview, including at least one paragraph of reflection of what you learned from the interview.	"I know this is a good school, but going back over specifics and talking to colleagues, I found real reasons behind the fact that we are a really good school. Now I have evidence to back up my beliefs."
3. Believe that their professional responsibilities extend beyond the classroom and school (e.g., advisory committees, parent-teacher organizations.)	Explore any three (3) of the following six websites: www.csos.jhu.edu : the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University, www.ed.gov/21stccl : 21st Century Community Learning Centers, www.ncrel.org : The North Central Regional Education Laboratories, www.pta.org : The National PTA, www.cisnc.org : The North Carolina chapter of Communities in Schools, www.communityschools.org : A national community schools network. Answer the question, "What specific roles can teacher leaders play in improving relationships between the school and the communities it serves?"	"I don't know if I learned a lot more about the school improvement efforts at my school, but I did learn about how my school works, and its strengths and weaknesses. It [the course] made me want to work harder to get parents and the community involved, and it made me feel empowered to try to make such changes."
7. Believe that their professional role includes providing leadership and guidance to prospective and practicing teachers.	With an administrator discuss the priorities for the new faculty learning that must occur for the school to reach its improvement potential. Discuss how administrators and teachers ensure that new learning is happening. Secure approval to take any aspect of these improvement strategies and design a staff development activity to accomplish this new learning.	"I learned that things just don't happen for teachers. Teachers who want to change and make changes will make changes! Also, we are very powerful, but we have to be willing to put forth the effort and use the power given us."

era when teachers report increased frustrations, restrictions, and fear (Beck-Frazier, 2005; Assaf, 2006), we must focus on ways to engage, share, and more effectively complete educational tasks. Teachers must be recognized for their years of experience, encouraged to participate in professional dialogue, validated for their skills in sustainable school improvement, and empowered to make greater contributions to schools. After completing the course students developed the knowledge, skills, and attitudes for leadership as addressed in the NMSA Standard 7 (NMSA, 2005). As one teacher so aptly stated:

When we reflect on leadership, it is frustrating and hard work. It forces you to evaluate your goals and your strategies. I feel more empowered now and I have a lot more confidence in myself. I'm not one to jump out there and always take the lead, but I know now that I am capable of doing that and I also see the rewards...whether it's in my classroom, in my grade level, or in my whole school (Student reflections, 2004).

What have we done differently? We have focused on specific skills of leadership, school culture, and school improvement. To complete this course successfully, teachers looked beyond their classrooms at the total school picture and worked to improve their schools. We have continually fine-tuned this course and modified it to fit specific groups of teachers from middle level educators to instructional technology staff.

From this course we learned that teacher leaders seek opportunities to lead and, given the chance to lead, they have been successful. We also found that many principals are willing to share the power of their positions. These findings suggest that educational frameworks that advocate shared responsibility and leadership have shown great promise in improving our educational system.

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