Leadership Redefined: an evocative context for teacher leadership

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ABSTRACT   *Teacher leadership has been shackled by archaic definitions of leadership and timeworn assumptions about who can lead. Such ideas have situated leadership in the hands of a few formal leaders. Teachers have not seen themselves reflected in these prevailing notions, nor invited into the process. This article argues that a new definition of constructivist leadership and accompanying assumptions opens the way for teachers to consider themselves as leaders. Further, it proposes that building leadership capacity through broad-based, skillful participation in the work of leadership invites teachers into the processes and actions of leadership. Several strategies that characterise such work are advanced and described.*

Introduction

Teacher leadership is not a new concept, yet each time we turn our attention to the idea it is as though we have discovered it anew. A fresh eye brings advantages, yet it also makes us feel as though we are starting over (Blackford 1995; Harris 2003). Teacher leadership, like the concept of leadership itself, keeps demanding our attention, the fruits of which are often difficult to attain and disappointing.

Why is engendering teacher leadership considered difficult by many principals and superintendents? Several reasons come to mind: a philosophy of leadership that situates leadership work within formal authority roles, a hierarchical view of authority and power, and an insistence that if we just find the right 'carrot', the right incentive package, we can coax teachers to take on leadership roles. Such attitudes produce short term, shallow and unsustainable results. Old assumptions bind and confine.

Perhaps our disappointments also arise from our tendencies to move quickly to the behaviours of teacher leaders and fail to amplify the importance of the context in which these behaviours are provoked. Context is more than culture, setting and timing. Language, beliefs and assumptions initially govern context. What is a leader and how does that concept differ from leadership? Who can lead? What do we assume about leaders—who they are, what they believe, how they behave?

Humans yearn for vitality, for purpose. Teachers who attain such vitality are

energised by their own curiosities, their colleagues and their students. They find joy and stimulation in the daily dilemmas of teaching and are intrigued by the challenge of school improvement in adult communities. Teachers become fully alive when their schools and districts provide opportunities for skillful participation, inquiry, dialogue, and reflection. They become more fully alive in the company of others. Such environments evoke and grow teacher leadership.

A teacher leader may be seen as a person in whom the dream of making a difference has been kept alive, or has been reawakened by engaging colleagues and a professional culture. Those who have managed to keep their sense of purpose alive and well are reflective, inquisitive, focused on improving their craft, action oriented; they accept responsibility for student learning and have a strong sense of self. That is, they know themselves and their intentions enough so that they are not intimidated into silence by others. They are open to learning and understand the major dimensions of learning in schools: the learning of students, learning of colleagues, learning of self, learning of the community. Those who are reawakened to their sense of purpose may find this path within an improving school, or in a setting outside the school, such as a network, university programme, or thoughtfully designed initiatives such as the National Board Certification process or the National Writing Project. When the source of reawakening is outside the school, these individuals may not be able to stay long in their own schools if those schools are incongruent with their renewed feelings and thinking about themselves and their mission as teachers.

Are these teachers rare gems to be discovered and nurtured or do these dispositions pre-exist in each of us, waiting to be released? Teacher leaders may be 'born' … yet the insistence here is that everyone is born to lead in the same way that everyone is born to learn. This article will insist that 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. Such a context is borne of a new conception of leadership itself and the language that suggests it, including different governing assumptions, and a framework for school improvement now known as leadership capacity.

Leadership Redefined

Leadership, both its definition and practice, has been an elusive idea. For hundreds of years we have been fascinated with leadership, yet we still have few shared understandings about what it is. We are often preoccupied with the 'heroes' of leadership, those charismatic creatures who have dominated the landscape, both as powerful models of values in action and as anti-heroes. We seem to understand that our failures as a global community to address the confounding questions of civilisation, poverty, illiteracy, conflict and war, inequity, are failures of leadership. Our homes and schools are the birthplaces of these problems. We have not educated children to be broadly literate, to access their places in the world economy, to

mediate conflict, and to value and practice equity. Yet we keep looking for those answers in the same places through the same archaic lens.

It is suggested that we have been looking in the wrong places and using the wrong lenses. These lenses have familiar panes, similar assumptions. Timeworn assumptions have persuaded us that leader and leadership are one and the same. Therefore, if only we can find the right qualities and characteristics of the Leader, we will have found the answer to the problems of leadership. When we assume that leadership lies in an individual, we look for the dispositions, skills, understandings and personality features that will make this person effective.

Then of course, goes the legend, if we teach these skills and characteristics to others, they too will be effective. We have sought to teach those skills to persons in positions of formal authority, leaving behind the vast majority of professionals who fail to see themselves reflected in these assumptions. This premise drove the effectiveness movement; it is not an adequate lens for today's world. Familiar paths are seductive. They coax us into moderate novelty, to tinkering with the present, to a failure to step back and think outside the box. We must depart from the familiar if we are to redefine leadership for the new century.

In 1995, my colleagues and I (Lambert, Walker, Zimmerman, Cooper, Lambert, Gardner, Ford-Slack) suggested that leadership could be understood as 'the reciprocal processes that enable participants in an educational community to construct meanings that lead toward a shared purpose of schooling'. We called this 'Constructivist Leadership'. Learning and leading are understood as intertwined since these conceptions arise from our understandings of what it is to be human. To be human is to learn, and to learn is to construct meaning and knowledge about the world that enables us to act purposefully.

Over the past several decades we have come to understand that all humans bring to the process of learning personal schemas that have been formed by prior experiences, beliefs, values, socio-cultural histories, and perceptions. When new experiences are encountered and mediated by reflection, inquiry and social interaction, meaning and knowledge are constructed. Learning takes place, as does adult development. When actively engaged in reflective dialogue, adults become more complex in their thinking about the world, more respectful of diverse perspectives, more flexible and open toward new experiences. Personal and professional learning require an interactive professional culture if adults are to engage with one another in the processes of growth and development. The concept of constructivist leadership is based on the same ideas that underlie constructivist learning: Adults, as well as children, learn through the processes of meaning and knowledge construction, inquiry, participation, and reflection. Leadership can be understood as the enactment of such reciprocal, purposeful learning in community.

Since 1995, there have been multiple shifts in understanding toward definitions of leadership that are cultural- and learning-centred rather than person-centred, that are co-constructed rather than situated in a pre-determined skill set for individuals. Several authors capture these shifting perceptions:

- Charlotte Roberts defines leadership as constructivist, problem solving, en-

gaging and about the leading of learning, rather than authority-based (Senge *et al.* 2000: 404, 414–418).

- Anne Conzemius and Jan O'Neill (2001) integrate constructivist leadership and the concept of 'leadership capacity' to describe leadership as the capacity of the school for broad-based, skillful participation in the creation and fulfillment of a vision focused on student learning.
- Richard Ackerman, Gordon Donaldson, Jr. and Rebecca Van Der Bogert (1996) view leadership as a process, a quest, … that entails learning to think and act as a leader in response to the ever-changing challenges of learning, and dealing with growing children and the adults who care about them. While the authors write primarily about the principal's learning quest, the definition does not demand that it be attached to a specific person in a specific role.
- Fritjof Capra suggests that 'In self-organizing systems, leadership is distributed, and responsibility becomes a capacity of the whole. Leadership, then, consists in continually facilitating the emergence of new structures, and incorporating the best of them into the organization's design' (1997: 8–9).
- Howard Gardner (1995, p. 22) proposes that leadership is 'a process that occurs within the minds of individuals who live in a culture—a process that entails the capacities to create stories, to understand and evaluate these stories, and to appreciate the struggle among stories. Ultimately, certain kinds of stories will typically become predominant—in particular, kinds of stories that provide an adequate and timely sense of identity for individuals who live within a community or institution'.
- James Spillane, Richard Halverson and John B. Diamond (2001) have captured our imaginations with 'Distributed Leadership' that holds that leadership cognition and activity are situated within an interactive web of actors (leaders and followers), artifacts, and situations. The situation, or context, is not an external force but an integral part of the leadership dynamic. Leadership is 'stretched over' leaders, followers, and activities within a reciprocal interdependency.

Those who are redefining leadership situate it in the processes among us, rather than in the skills or disposition of a leader. As a concept separate from, yet integrated with, leader, leadership stands as a broader notion, a more encompassing idea. This breadth is evident when we consider the connections or processes among individual leaders that are embedded in the context, the culture of an organisation. These processes include problem solving; broad-based, skillful participation (leadership capacity); task enactment, conversations and stories. These processes engender a wave of energy and purpose that engages and pulls others into the work of leadership.

How we define leadership 'engages and pulls others into the work of leadership'. When leadership means a person in a specific role enveloped in formal authority, teachers do not see themselves reflected in that image. When leadership becomes a broadly inclusive culture concept, it provokes a different response: I can see myself as participating in this learning work with my colleagues. Leadership

realises purpose, the sense of purpose that teachers brought with them into this profession.

Further, leadership defined as a form of learning situates that work within the context of teaching and learning. So defined, it forms a sacred alliance among teaching, learning and leading. 'It is what I do', suggested one teacher, 'I attend to the learning of others. Now I am asked to extend my attention from my students and myself to my colleagues as well. When I become a better teacher, I become a better leader and vice versa'. A corollary might suggest: Can all children learn? Can all children lead? Can all adults learn? Can all adults lead? The fourth question gives some pause among audiences. It assumes that all adults have the right, capability and responsibility to be a leader. The new language of leadership, accompanied by assumptions about who can learn and who can lead, frame the foundation for an evocative context for teacher leadership.

The most vital aspect of this new definition lies in its relationship to learning. It is not new to connect leadership to the creation of a learning organisation; it is not new to connect leadership to the transformation of followers; it is not new to envision a community of leaders. These movements have paved the way for some evocative assumptions about leadership. It is suggested that those assumptions could be summarised as:

(1) Leadership may be understood as reciprocal, purposeful learning in community.
(2) Everyone has the right, responsibility and capability to be a leader.
(3) The adult learning environment in the school and district is the most critical factor in evoking leadership identities and actions.
(4) Within that environment, opportunities for skillful participation top the list of priorities.
(5) How we define leadership frames how people will participate.
(6) Educators are purposeful—leading realises purpose.

Leadership Capacity as a Framework for Teacher Leadership

In the last five years, the concepts of leadership capacity and learning communities have captured the imagination of educators. 'Leadership capacity' can be defined as broad-based, skillful participation in the work of leadership (Lambert 1998). This concept forms a systemic framework for school improvement, a context in which teacher leadership is invited, supported and appreciated (Harris & Lambert 2003).

Leadership capacity is found to be a function of several features: broad-based, skillful participation; shared vision that brings coherence; inquiry based use of information to inform decisions and practice; roles and responsibilities that are collaborative and lead to collective responsibility; reflective practice as the genesis of innovation and self-organising practice; and high or steadily improving student performance (Lambert 2003). Notice that leadership capacity as discussed here is an institutional concept, rather than a personal one.

Leadership capacity suggests several goals:

- Development of all adults within the school community (teachers, staff, parents, community members) as reflective, skillful leaders.
- Achievement of steady and lasting improvement in student performance and development.
- Construction of schools and districts that are sustainable organisations.

Any framework with promise must address learning for school improvement on multiple levels—individuals and groups, adults and students, schools and districts, and its promises of sustainable results.

A high leadership capacity school, therefore, involves broad-based, skillful participation in the work of leadership on the part of teachers as well as other school community members. Since leadership is defined as reciprocal, purposeful learning in community, such 'work' embraces a shared vision, inquiry, dialogue, reflection and a focus on learning. Skillful participation in this work of leadership is more likely to result in a learning community, for educators who learn from each are more likely to lead (Little 1990, 2002; Lambert *et al.* 1995; Lambert 1998). Hence a learning community is at the heart of a high leadership capacity school—they are parallel constructs.

Actions in an Evocative Context

Actions and programmes that aspire to create complex learning communities through a leadership capacity framework give attention to the work of leadership suggested above. These actions are derived from our language and assumptions about leadership and situated with a framework for school improvement. Each of these sample actions is derived from the assumption that everyone learns, everyone leads.

Leadership actions are nestled within structures that serve as containers for the conversations. Such structures may include governance groups, teams, learning communities, action research and study groups.

To begin and sustain teacher leadership, begin and sustain the conversation. Conversations come in many forms. Coaching questions asked or ideas shared in one-on-one conversations, data dialogues in inquiring conversations, exploring action research, engaging with parents and community members in partnering conversations, and long-range planning in sustaining conversations all evoke values, experiences and increasingly skillful actions. These conversations share a few common elements: shared intention, search for understanding, remembering and reflecting on beliefs and experiences, revelation of ideas and information, and respectful listening (Lambert *et al.* 1995, 2002).

Conversations that are dialogues are the most powerful means for evoking our thoughts and feelings about issues and self. Being listened to and listening to others has an almost magical effect on our expressions as a professional. Issues and problems are held at arms length and examined from all sides, instead of being subjected to quick opinions and ready solutions. Coaching stems from the same principles as dialogue, yet is even more personal in approach. Instructional coaching

has been with us for many decades, but very little attention has been given to leadership coaching.

Coaching into leadership means posing the questions that will expand a teacher's focus (or that of other staff, students, parents or community members) from self as reflective practitioner to leading others. On the Continuum of Emerging Teacher Leadership in the Appendix, this means expanding the actions in the left-hand column to include more of those in the right hand column. Coaching questions are designed to expand perspectives and responsibilities for the leading of and with others by moving our thinking toward the right-hand column on the continuum. These are examples that suggest coaching as an invaluable aspect of leadership development. Leadership coaching can be joined with instructional coaching, since student learning and adult learning are parallel ideas. For instance:

What is your outcome for the students?	What is your outcome for working with your team?
What role will you play?	What role will you play?
What evidence will you look for that will tell you that you have been successful?	What evidence will you look for that will tell you that you have been successful?

Mentoring into leadership is an even larger perspective than coaching, although coaching is an essential element in the process. The mentoring process involves coaching and feedback, modelling, provision for leadership experiences, training, and participation in arenas outside of the classroom and school. When mentors express deep beliefs in our capacities, we tend to become more of the person we are perceived to be. The mentoring process can develop efficacy in problem solving and decision making, offer both support and challenge, and facilitate a professional vision (Lipton & Wellman 2001). Teacher leaders mentor others into leadership.

Networking provides yet a broader context and a larger learning community for the development of teacher voice and self-concept. In a larger arena, such as regional or national networks, teachers see themselves as part of a profession; they find themselves listened to in new ways; they hear and see how others think and interact and, in so doing, change how they perceive themselves as teachers. The National Writing Project is an excellent example of a network that propels professional growth. Significant network practices include the following:

- approaching every colleague as a valued contributor;
- viewing teachers as experts;
- creating forums for sharing, dialogue, and critique;
- turning ownership of learning over to the learners;
- situating learning in practice and relationships, providing multiple entry points into learning communities, adopting an inquiry stance;
- sharing leadership; and
- rethinking professional identity and linking it to professional community (Lieberman & Wood 2001: 7).

The networking flourishes best when the social practices among participants include

opportunities to learn, be in community, and take on leadership responsibilities at the local site (p. 28). Networking, like local, district, or regional learning communities, can provide the context in which professionalism merges into new identities for teachers.

The integration of new teachers into the school is a critical aspect of leadership development and sustainability. Thoughtful enculturation can serve to weave the cloth of community together so that sharp shifts in the culture (because of the arrival of many new teachers, for example) do not tear the pattern of the school's improvement processes.

Support for beginning teachers can contribute to building leadership capabilities in both veteran and new teachers. The role of mentor to new colleagues is an important professional leadership role for the veteran teacher. Simply by serving in that role, the mentor is accepting shared responsibility for the performance and professional success of a colleague. It is also a role that emerges naturally from the role of classroom teacher, except that now the skilled veteran is a teacher of teachers, as well as of students.

These new teacher mentors model the actions and behaviours that contribute to quality instruction and teacher leadership—reflective inquiry into one's classroom practice as well as school-based issues, a focus on student learning and the acceptance of responsibility for each student's learning, an ongoing thirst for new learning and the capacity to adapt it to one's own practice, and the valuing of colleagueship and professional dialogue that is directed towards the achievement of high professional standards.

Teacher induction programmes enable new teachers to begin their careers understanding the value of an environment that supports adult learning and, thereby, teacher leadership. This focus on teacher efficacy contributes to keeping alive the passion and commitment that accompany most new teachers into the profession and which are essential ingredients of teacher leadership. Guided by such a focus on teacher efficacy and professional standards, new teachers can emerge as leaders early in their careers (Gless 2002).

The sample actions above emerge from an understanding that leading is everyone's work and that we grow into those understandings when we engage with others to make sense of our world, reach out to bring new teachers into full membership in the community, commit to shared outcomes and develop our identities as owners, not tenants, of our schools (Barth 1999).

Conclusion

Edna St. Vincent Millay was a poet for her age and ours as well. She may have had a window into our world today when she wrote:

Upon this gifted age, in its dark hour

Rains from the sky a meteoric shower

Of facts … they lie unquestioned, uncombined,

> Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill
>
> Is daily spun, but there exists no loom
>
> To weave it into fabric. (Edna St. Vincent Millay, *Huntsman, What Quarry*, 1939)

The complexity of today's world showers us with facts and non-facts, images and ideas, information and disinformation. Our search for meaning in this uncertain world requires a loom upon which we can weave meaning and knowledge, make sense of this world. Such an encounter with meaning and wisdom is essential if we are to come to understand the ravages of poverty, illiteracy, conflict and war, inequities. We can find our early looms in school, frameworks for making sense of the world and for seeing ourselves as contributing members of civilisation.

Before we can construct looms for our children, however, we as adults must find them for ourselves. This commitment means every adult in the school, not just those with formal authority. Our desperate search for a loom on which to weave teacher leadership begins with our language, our beliefs and assumptions, our frames for meaning and improvement. How leadership is defined, what assumptions we hold about leadership and how we situate them within the framework of leadership capacity, these three notions form an evocative context for teacher leadership.

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