

**Understanding Limits in Teacher Leaders’  
Relationships with Teachers**

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Teacher leaders often are described as ideally suited to help bring about change in teachers’ practice.<sup>1</sup> Unlike the consultants and change experts who enter schools from outside, teacher leaders are already “in.” The term “teacher leader,” as we use it here, refers to teachers considered exemplary who are released from the classroom to help other teachers change. The education community expects much from these teacher leaders. Not only are they already “in,” but, as teachers themselves, they understand schools and have a long-term, not hit-and-run, commitment to school change. There is a fundamental kinship with fellow teachers. This kinship drives teacher leaders to take very seriously the relationships they form with teachers, see these relationships as vital to the work at hand, and pursue relationships with the utmost delicacy and tact. Trust is central to the bond between teacher leaders and the teachers they serve.

Yet these relationships, despite their intensity, are not all-powerful. If we look more deeply into teacher leader—teacher relationships, we see that these relationships come with serious limitations that can diminish the potential of teacher leaders to transform teacher practice. Specifically, we see how teacher leaders struggle without a strong

community of support that is greater than the relationship between an individual teacher leader and teacher. Without such support, unrealistic expectations are placed on individual relationships to advance reform. Teacher leaders feel a profound commitment to the development of their colleagues, and they are uniquely positioned to shape colleagues' practice. We believe that by looking carefully at how teacher leaders and teachers currently work together, in the relationships they form, we can assess the potential for teacher leadership to contribute to large scale reform in education.

One hundred and sixty five teacher leaders from six urban school systems participated in our study on the nature of teacher leadership.<sup>2</sup> While the term “teacher leader” in the research literature covers a range of roles, the teacher leaders in our study focused on mathematics and science and were released full-time from their classrooms. Their mission was to help bring about large-scale, long-term instructional change among teachers. These teacher leaders helped us understand many aspects of their work, including how they spend their time, key successes and challenges they experience, and specific techniques they use with teachers. In focus groups and individual interviews, we were struck by how strongly teacher leaders stressed the importance of warm and trusting relationships in their work with teachers.

These relationships matter immensely to teacher leaders for two reasons. First, they believe their own kinship with teachers – as teachers themselves – uniquely qualifies them to help. Second, their work is inspired by a sense of moral purpose. Teacher leaders believe they have “seen the light,” and want to share their experience of the world of reform with their colleagues. One teacher leader offered a “mountain top” image:

I kind of think of it as...I've been to the mountain top, and I can see what's on the other side...I know what's over there, if they'll [teachers] just come on over the mountain with me.<sup>3</sup>

His words capture this driving sense of purpose among teacher leaders. They've been to the mountain top of reform and, on the other side, they have discovered things like standards-based curricula that stimulate children in new ways and methods that facilitate a constructivist classroom. They believe they can help colleagues to do the same. And, they believe a close relationship with each teacher is the foundation for such change.

### **Relationships Are Not Automatic**

When we think of relationships, we feel on familiar ground. We know our professional relationships influence job satisfaction and efficiency. We might say, “I like my job because I have a good relationship with my coworkers,” or, “I want to leave my job because I dislike the people with whom I work.” And we might readily agree that good relationships with teachers are essential to teacher leader work. Recent research by Bryk and Schneider reinforces this message, suggesting that the relationships school people have with one another can make or break reform.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, productive relationships between teacher leaders and teachers are not automatic – they must be developed. Our study provides clear images of how teacher leaders set

about the hard work of establishing these relationships with teachers. Often, we have seen teacher leaders emphasize their own credibility as teachers, and rely on this shared experience as the basis for relationship. The literature on teacher leadership supports the idea that teacher leaders, as teachers themselves, are uniquely qualified to help colleagues change practice.<sup>5</sup> This idea is also represented in Rogers' research on change agents, which suggests that effective change agents combine likeness with clients with external credibility.<sup>6</sup>

However, this common background as teachers is not enough. Teacher leaders work hard to gain teacher trust and build rapport in further ways, such as offering demonstration lessons. The teacher leader in the passage below describes how she is,

...gradually building that trust and building that visibility that you're there, and that support, and going in and doing a lesson, and then going back, and just building rapport with them. You have to do that first. You just can't go in and be the sage on the stage. You have to be the guide from the side.

Once in the classroom, teacher leaders highlight the importance of continuing to build rapport and trust with the teacher. Often this rapport is cemented with physical displays of support. As one teacher leader said, "We're holding their [teachers'] hand and patting them on the back." The key, according to many teacher leaders, is to offer support in a friendly, non-threatening way: "You have to develop a rapport with other people, and a level of respect where they will listen to what you're saying, and value what you say."

Such trust-building takes time, as the following teacher leader suggests:

I guess it's the groundwork you lay before you start, trying to help them see that you're not there in a judgmental position. And you can tell them that from the beginning. They don't always believe you for a while. And I think the longer you're there, the more comfortable they become with you being there.

Building trusting relationships takes time, energy and persistence. Relationship building is certainly aided by the background and context teacher leaders share with teachers, but trusting relationships don't come about automatically. We acknowledge that teacher leaders must instill trust to pursue meaningful work with teachers. However, a fuller understanding of the difficulties teacher leaders experience building trust sheds light on the limits of these relationships.

### **Relationships Come with Limitations**

All of us may feel we know what relationships are about, but data on teacher leaders' relationships with teachers show that they are more complicated than we might expect. We have seen serious limits in the *kinds* of relationships constructed by teacher leaders in our study, limits which make it extremely difficult for teacher leaders to successfully help teachers change practice. Teacher leaders build trust and rapport with teachers in three main ways: by giving teachers gifts, by adopting an "anything-you-need" stance toward

supporting teachers in the classroom, and by using unfailingly accepting and uncritical language. Each strategy is an attempt to build teacher involvement with teacher leaders, but at a cost. When bearing gifts is a feature of the work, the gifts have to keep coming. When an “anything-you-need” stance is adopted, teacher leaders struggle to introduce important elements of their own agenda into their work with teachers. When accepting language is the norm, teacher leaders cannot provide critical feedback when it becomes necessary. In all three cases, the very elements of the relationship that help the teacher leader gain admittance into the teacher’s world also prevent the teacher leader, once in that world, from having sufficient influence to help change teacher practice.

A dramatic example of a limited relationship occurs when teacher leaders attempt to engage teachers with resources, as the following teacher leader explains:

And so I came bearing gifts is what it came down to. I came saying, “Okay, if you [teachers] will join this project, I’ll buy everything for it. I’ll buy all the aquariums, I’ll buy all the pumps, will pay the fieldtrips, will do the whole thing.” And it was really kind of when I came that way... with the open arms, that they decided to come to the table and join the project.

We acknowledge the importance of resources to help teachers begin to change practice. However, when such resources are the currency by which teacher leaders pay for entry into classrooms, the teacher leader – teacher relationship can become shaped largely by the “gifts” themselves, and continued gift-giving.

Teacher leaders’ work can be further limited by the stance of perpetual helpfulness. This stance involves responding to the expressed needs of teachers, whatever those needs might be. Often, teacher leaders told us that they hoped, later on, to introduce more and more elements of their own agenda, for example, addressing long-held beliefs about which students can learn or incorporating new and different instructional practices in the classroom. However, the “anything-you-need” relationship can take on a life of its own, one shaped almost entirely by the teacher’s agenda. The two teacher leaders in the following passage exemplify this “anything-you-need” approach as they explain why they are cutting out manipulatives for a teacher:

We cut out her games for her [the teacher], which people would say is a bad use of teacher leader time and I thought, no, because that develops such good rapport with her that we would do that...and she really did appreciate it.

When the teacher leader relationship is shaped by the teacher’s needs, the terms of the relationship can preclude some (or much) of the work that the teacher leader believes is necessary.

The use of accepting, uncritical language is a third way that teacher leaders attempt to develop relationships and gain teacher trust. This language communicates to teachers that they will not be judged. Teacher leaders understandably want teachers to learn to adopt an open-minded, reflective orientation toward their own work, and reason they can only

do so in a secure, low-risk environment. The following illustrates how the teacher leader uses uncritical language to communicate new strategies to a reluctant teacher:

It's more of a "I suggest" and "I think we should," you know, it's more, "I think we should..." and, "I did this when I was in the classroom and it worked beautifully..." And this is the way I can actually share my experience. And I talk more about "we" and "this is the way it was" and "I would suggest" and, you know, that kind of thing.

Not only is this language designed to be unobjectionable, but it captures a central struggle teacher leaders experience both to leverage their sameness with teachers – the sense that we are all teachers here – and to help teachers based on their own more extensive experience. As one teacher leader paradoxically put it, feedback to teachers needs to involve "explaining to them what they should have been doing ... in a very tactful way, so that I don't make them feel that they were doing anything wrong." Another teacher leader tries to "determine how I can best approach them [teachers] without putting them off." This balance between encouragement and critique is a difficult one to strike, much less maintain. Often, teacher leaders lean in the direction of encouragement at the expense of challenging critique, limiting their ability to catalyze substantial teacher change.

### **Individual Relationships Are Not Enough**

It can take a long time for the gifts, the "anything-you-need" stance, and the uncritical language to secure teacher trust. This teacher leader describes the slow pace of change:

There's a lot of just spending time with [teachers], building their confidence, building their content, and getting buy-in from them. I need them to believe that what I'm telling them is the truth, that these kids really can learn the math, and can learn the science. They just need the opportunities... So you have to work really hard, and that's slow, very slow, at building the capacity for [teachers] to be able to change their philosophy.

We believe teacher leader work might not be so hard, or so slow, if greater supports were in place to begin with. When others in the educational community, from superintendents to curriculum supervisors to principals, help convince teachers to work with teacher leaders, change may come sooner. When administrators step in to encourage teachers to give teacher leaders a chance, teacher leaders may have more success. When district policies reinforce what teacher leaders do, with standards-based curriculum and testing aligned to teacher leader goals, changing teacher practice may be easier for teacher leaders.

The lack of sustained community support in many of the six urban areas we studied shows in the difficult experiences teacher leaders have, as when they are kept out of classrooms or compelled to persuade teachers to work with them. These are examples of the sad fact that, without support across the education system, teacher leader work suffers. The teacher leader in the following passage talks about her disappointment when shut out by teachers:

I think in the beginning it was very difficult, because they don't trust you. Teachers don't trust you. And it's very, very difficult. I know that I would come to the office just in tears, because you're just taking so much. They don't want to see you at the beginning. They don't even want to hear what you have to say.

When teacher leaders have to act as solo agents, without the steady backing of school and district personnel and policies, teachers have the option of rejecting them. Each teacher leader must then rely on personal persuasive powers and the previously described strategies that can, ultimately, limit their impact.

Other teacher leaders say they feel they must “sell” their usefulness to teachers. The teacher leader below describes how she tried to market her role as a teacher leader to overcome teachers' lack of interest:

So I think a lot of it was selling ourselves. That we're here for you [the teachers] and we're not here to judge you. We're not here because you're doing something wrong. We're just here because we know this works for kids. And so that, I think, was a challenge. One of the biggest challenges was selling ourselves, or selling myself.

Clearly, teacher leaders' relationships with individual teachers come with profound limits when set in an unsupportive context. Within the resulting relationships, teacher leaders find themselves unintentionally perpetuating the very isolationism that already plagues the teaching profession. Teachers shut the classroom door and work independently for most of the school day. If a teacher leader is allowed in, often the work continues to be private. The teacher leader may enter the classroom world, but in many ways remains a powerless observer, unable to challenge the nature of the work there without outside support.

Ironically, teacher leaders, as teachers themselves, stand to counteract the isolationism many teachers experience. The development of distributed leadership<sup>7</sup> and professional communities<sup>8</sup> come to mind, of teacher leaders encouraging teachers to take a stronger role in the nature and organization of their work. Current writing highlights the importance of using the power of such communities to promote real change.<sup>9</sup> While no single, firm definition of “community” emerges in our teacher leadership data, it is clear that a powerful disconnect exists. On the one side, we have images of the role of community in change and of teacher leaders as builders of community. On the other, we have what our data show, teacher leaders as solo agents, working primarily with individual teachers behind closed doors. Whatever our definition of community, we know it must be about more than these one-on-one relationships (or even the aggregation of such individual relationships), if teacher leaders are to help bring about substantial changes in teacher practice.

## **Conclusion**

Our primary purpose has been to highlight how teacher leaders construct and experience relationships with teachers. This means looking beyond our assumption that relationships guarantee change, and that teacher leaders, as teachers themselves, are wholly equipped

with all they need to make change happen. We have seen that teacher leaders rely heavily on building trust to cement relationships, believing that trusting relationships will lead to reform. We have also seen that such relationships can come with limits that hold teacher leaders back from realizing their full potential in their work with teachers. Furthermore, lack of community support overburdens these relationships as the sole vehicle for reform.

Teacher leaders are a powerful and distinctive resource, capable of developing significant and meaningful relationships with the very teachers who need to change classroom practice. They possess a sincere dedication to supporting their colleagues in the change process. In exploring the nature of their work and the struggles they face in relationships with teachers, we have come to appreciate the pioneering work that teacher leaders do, both in building trust and rapport with teachers and in attempting to escape the limitations of those relationships. However, as solo agents sent into schools to galvanize reform, their impact will remain limited, regardless of their relationships with individual teachers. It is in places where district, school and community leaders unite to support and actively facilitate teacher leadership work as a key strategy in a larger reform system that teacher leaders can promote real transformation in teachers' practice.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Ronald S. Barth, “Teachers at the Helm,” *Education Week*, February 2001, pp. 32-33, 48; Rachelle Feiler, Margaret Heritage and Ronald Gallimore, “Teachers Leading Teachers,” *Educational Leadership*, April 2000, pp. 66-69; Michael Fullan, “Why Teachers Must Become Change Agents,” *Educational Leadership*, March 1993, pp. 12-17; and Marilyn Katzenmeyer and Gayle Moller, *Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Leadership Development for Teachers* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> This article is based on the three year study, **Teacher Leadership for Systemic Reform**, funded by the National Science Foundation (award # 9970830). Led by co-PIs Barbara Miller and Brian Lord of the Education Development Center, Inc., research focused on how teacher leadership work, as configured by Urban Systemic Initiatives and Programs, helped to develop and sustain science/math/technology education reform on scale in six urban districts.

<sup>3</sup> This and all subsequent quotes in our article are drawn from interviews with teacher leaders in six urban districts in 2001, conducted as part of the **Teacher Leadership for Systemic Reform** study.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony S. Bryk and Barbara Schneider, *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement* (New York, NY: Russell Sage, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Gordon A. Donaldson, *Cultivating Leadership in Schools: Connecting People, Purpose and Practice* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2001); Michael Fullan, *The Challenge of School Change: A Collection of Articles* (Arlington Heights, IL: IRI/Skylight Training and Publishing, 1997); and Ann Lieberman, Ellen R. Saxl, and Matthew B. Miles, “Teacher Leadership: Ideology and Practice,” in *The Jossey-Bass Reader on Educational Leadership* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000), pp. 348-365.

<sup>6</sup> Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> James Spillane, “Local Theories of Teacher Change: The Pedagogy of District Policies and Programs,” *Teachers College Record*, April 2002, pp. 377-420.

<sup>8</sup> Judith W. Little, “Assessing the Prospects for Teacher Leadership,” in *The Jossey-Bass Reader on Educational Leadership* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000), pp. 390-418.

<sup>9</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teachers Life* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998); Etienne C. Wenger and William M. Snyder, “Communities of Practice: The Organizational Frontier,” *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 2000, pp. 139-145.