

Teacher Leader Decision Making

Dr. Valjeaner B. Ford

Associate Professor of Professional Pedagogy and Research

University of North Carolina

Pembroke, North Carolina

Dr. Douglas E. Roby

Professor of Educational Leadership

Wright State University

Dayton, Ohio

Abstract

This study focused on teacher leader attitudes concerning decision-making skills. Teacher leader masters degree students were participants in this study. These experienced teachers worked toward discovering skill strengths and weaknesses, and then developed plans for improving specific skill areas that were warranted. Teachers included within the study (N=101) examined their skills for making decisions at the workplace, public and private preschools, elementary, middle/junior high, and high schools. A decision making survey was administered to the teachers, and then measures of central tendency were used for analysis. Teachers were also compared based on years of teaching experience, checking for statistical significance in decision making skills.

Introduction

One does not have to look very far to realize the growing innumerable problems that overwhelm the American public education as school leadership has in recent years. It is apparent that there is a need to have competent, richly qualified, committed, dedicated and enlightened professional leadership. There is a genuine need to implement authentic school reform to enhance student learning. In an effort to bring attention to the issues of school leadership the Institute of Educational Leadership (IEL) led a national effort by School Leadership for the 21st Century Initiative (2000). One of four levels of school leadership-state, district, principal and teacher were examined to improve public education with the primary focus of redefining the teacher as leader in decision making.

Purpose of Study

Educators, like others, make decisions everyday. According to Spradlin (2003), a

decision is simply an allocation of resources. It is “irrevocable”, except that new decisions may reverse the original preference. Ideally, we want to make the best decision possible, with an unwritten goal of never having to reverse the decision, unless circumstances out of our control force a new decision, especially if the original purpose is no longer for the good of the individual (s) and/or workplace.

The school is no different than any other workplace. Teachers recognized as formal and informal leaders realize that decisions may consume resources, time, energy, and affect morale. There are times when educators must come to agreement on issues, procedures, and policies that affect individuals and teams. Yet conflict can often block dialogue and decision making, be considered interpersonally threatening, and undermine supportive working conditions (Austin & Harkins, 2008).

Fortunately, teacher leaders that are considered influential and respected contributors by their peers and supervisors sense a responsibility to mediate and ideally help resolve differences in opinions, beliefs, and attitudes (Roby, 2009). When this occurs, an avenue for collaborative decision making becomes available, and decisions crucial for effectiveness at the workplace are solid, researched, and discussed thoroughly. As Sola (1984) states: “Everyone who has a part in making decisions that affect education ought to be concerned for the moral values that are at stake.”

This study involves teachers working on graduate coursework to obtain a masters degree in teacher leadership. They are pursuing their leadership potential, partially by analyzing their skill levels in several leadership areas. These teachers have set goals to be teacher leaders at their school. This study focused on decision making skills.

Review of Literature

Inside the Task Force on Teacher Leadership (2001), there was strong emotion and an attitude that the system has a history of not treating teachers as leaders. Historically, the main paths to leadership for teachers have been: 1) espousing to become an administrator, 2) organizing or establishing teacher-type “teacher movements” (more common in urban settings); and 3) becoming involved in local unions affairs, these actions helped to improve the state of affairs in the teaching profession. As a result of the work of the Task Force it was determined that there was a vast number of impediments, therefore the existing system was ripe for teacher-driven change from within.

Within the right culture of a school and a strong self-confident principal who is willing to share some of his or her power, there is a potential for teachers to become a serious force in local school policy (Barth, 2001). There is something deep and powerful (Barth, 2001) inside school cultures as it seems to work against “teacher leadership.” Without the involvement of teachers in the function of the school, the school day would be altogether too mechanical and impersonal. There are at least ten areas that have a major impact on teacher-student relationships in the decision-making process that is vital to the day-to-day operation of the school:

- Shaping the curriculum;
- Evaluating teacher performance;
- Choosing textbooks and instructional materials;
- Deciding whether students are tracked in to special classes;
- Designing staff development and in-service programs;
- Setting standards for student behavior;
- Setting promotion and retention policies;
- Deciding school budgets;
- Selecting new teachers; and
- Selecting new administrators.

Historically, in other professional arenas, exercising responsibility and holding everyone accountable to the key elements mentioned above is common day-to-day practices that lead to active contribution in the affairs of the organization. In today's economy, it has become a part of acceptable intelligence, primarily since the information age became a reality, that vertical hierarchy (pecking -order) is **not** the acceptable manner to use in organizations and associations. Horizontal information-sharing networks and collective decision- making are the new normal to build teachers as leaders in the decision making process. Inflexible and unyielding structures are becoming an anachronism, whereas organizational fluidity is taken for granted. According to the 200 human service models (with the exception of education) leadership is perceived as being transformational as opposed to transactional. Moreover, all sides of an issue are heard before final decisions are made, this is a fact of life, as it is most often practiced in public education (Darling-Hammond, 1999).

Even though some opponents would argue that the outcomes of today's teacher training institutions are not actually qualified to take on more than the day-to-day obligations of managing a classroom full of youngsters, that is quite the contrary according to anecdotal evidence across the nation's classrooms. Farkas (2000) states, "Few schools operate democratically." Moreover, as teachers become increasingly involved in leadership roles beyond the classroom their schools can become more democratic than dictatorial, and everybody benefits. When schools are more democratic in culture, it sets the stage for more student involvement that inevitably leads to greater student success.

Teacher leadership is not about "teacher control." It is to a certain extent, about mobilizing and empowering teachers to strengthen relationships with their students that enhance collaboration, a type of mutual teacher leadership that becomes embedded in the fabric of the daily life of the school. The teacher as leader in shared decision-making is becoming an increasingly observable presence in schools across the nation. One pressing prerequisite that cannot be ignored is that the teacher is the driving force to student success and professional learning communities. Teacher leadership is becoming more influential, and therefore, teaching must become a genuine profession rather than one still

seeking public legitimacy (Berry, 1990). Noticeably, teaching lacks many of the qualities that define a real profession. Salary, as one of the more recognizable factors of professional status, unfortunately presents a discouraging description. The debate still exists even today over whether teaching is a genuine, full-fledged profession whose teachers should or should not be part of the leadership positions of public education induces diverse emotions (Milken, 2000).

Democracy Sidelined

It is apparent that teachers should be recognized as vital players and decision makers of school policy-framing and governing processes in the nation's school system (National Commission on Teaching & American Future, 1996). School leadership has an antiquity of top-down and hierarchical in nature that needs to be addressed if teachers are to be directly and continuously involved in the decisions of substance (Troen & Boles, 1993). Some principals and superintendents (Tyson, 1993) are beginning to realize that teachers are specialists and authorities on certain matters and should be associates rather than subordinates.

There are those however, who are still wedded to the patriarchal view of leadership as being some-what "dictatorial" in nature. On the contrary, a large majority of principals, especially in the secondary level, (middle and high schools), solicit classroom teachers to serve as department chairs, team and grade level leaders, School of Improvement Team (SIT) chair, often for momentary compensation or a course reduction as an incentive to serve as leader. Excellent teachers (Wilson, 1993) possess knowledge of children and their content, commitment, empathy, dedication and sensitivity to families and community are priceless and should be rewarded accordingly with respect and professionalism. "In common with other leaders, teacher leaders seek challenge, change, growth and an opportunity to be a part of the decision-making process in the operation of schools" (Bradley, 2000).

Shared Decision-Making

In a study (Day, 2002), teacher leadership inspires teachers to invest in their future as well as the distribution of leadership empowers teachers to take a greater part in the administration of their school. A result of teacher involvement leads to decision-making in all aspects of the school culture. It was revealed (McCay, 2001), the major reason teachers left their schools was the lack of an opportunity for growth and advancement. Successful schools are inter connected with the community and continually rely on the leadership and collaboration of their teachers. Teamwork galvanizes collaboration and the team concept of professional learning communities (PLC), common planning time, shared specialized development, common lesson plans and team reviews of student work. Site decisions should be applicable to student learning with teachers at the helm of substantive decisions concerning changes that shape their

students' day-to-day lives. It is necessary for teachers to have an assortment of job related roles to ensure growth within the profession (Koppich, 2001) such as serving as lead teachers, mentors and coaches for new teachers, peer assessors and even adjunct faculty depending on the content.

Teacher leadership roles vary across Local Education Districts (LEAs), for example, some school districts allow teachers and parents to become actively involved in interviewing prospective new teachers for their school. At other school districts, hiring decisions are made exclusively by principals and in some districts the central office. At some schools, teachers are highly regarded as budget experts and provide significant input concerning budget priorities. Additionally, at some school districts, budgeting is performed primarily by the principal. Many school sites do not include teacher compensation in their budget to reimburse teachers for their work in school-wide activities and staff development. The budget crisis has had a considerable impact on how some school districts reward teachers for their participation in teacher leadership roles and compensation for their valuable time spent on decision-making projects within their school or district.

Teacher Leadership Capacity

Teacher leadership is an essential element of successful school reform and the professionalism of teachers (Lieberman, Saxl & Miles, 2000). It is evident that teachers should become more accountable and assume the roles of leadership for school/district-wide transformation and decision-making (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Muijs & Harris, 2003). A clear definition of teacher leadership is lacking in consensus. Teacher leadership defined (Troen & Boles, 1994) as a collaborative effort in which teachers expand proficiency and endorse professional development to improve pedagogy. Walsey (1991) asserts; however that teacher leaders profit from collaborative arrangements in addition, they have the ability to encourage and support colleagues, to do things they wouldn't ordinarily deem without the influence of the leader.

Similarly, according to Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) "teacher leaders are those teachers who lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of learners and leaders, and persuade others to strive toward professional growth." Moreover, teacher leadership is also characterized (Gabriel, 2005), as teacher leaders who empower other teachers, change the school culture, build and sustain a successful school team, and prepare other prospective leaders to improve student outcome. Teacher leaders are found to be individuals who are distinguished by their knowledge, comprehension, experience, vision, love, and respect for children (Miller & O' Shea, 1992).

Numerous studies reveal that teachers participate in decision-making and collaborative teacher-principal leadership that contribute to school success, teaching excellence and enhancement in student achievement (Glover, Miller, Gambling, Gough

& Johnson, 1999; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Marks & Louis, 1997).) Teacher leaders build trust, relationships, rapport, make school-wide decisions, manage a variety of resources, demonstrate collegiality, coordinate work, demonstrate knowledge and excel in problem solving and decision-making. Teacher leadership is not about empowering teachers, it expands beyond decentralization of the decision-making process (Koppich, 2001). It is additionally about mobilizing the leading edge of teaching and increasing teachers' ability to make positive changes that inevitably leads to improved student achievement. Teacher leadership is in essence a shared and collective endeavor that recognizes the probability for all teachers to be leaders and decision-makers and change agents for students (Muijs & Harris, 2003).

Method

Participants

Teachers pursuing a masters degree in teacher leadership (N=101) from school districts throughout southwestern Ohio participated in the study. Seventy five percent were female. Sixty percent of the teachers had less than five years of experience. Forty percent of the teachers had 6-20 years experience, with the majority of this participant group in the 6-10 years range. Approximately 65 percent taught at the elementary level, 15 percent were middle school teachers, and the remainder taught at the high school. Ninety five percent of the participants were Caucasian, and five percent were African-American. Thirty two percent worked in rural school districts, followed by 28 percent in suburban settings, and 10 percent in city schools.

Procedure

As one component to the graduate course requirements, teachers were asked to complete a self-assessment survey focusing on perceptions of decision making skills at that point in their career. The 12-item survey was constructed by the author, based on a review of variables affecting decision making (Spradlin, 2003, Beebe & Masterson, 2002). A Likert-type scale was employed. Students rated themselves from one (1- seldom) through five (5 – always) on the statements (Table 1).

Table 1.
Decision Making Skills
Assessment

		Seldom	Sometime s	Usually	Frequentl y	Always
1	I understand the difference between operational and professional decisions.	1	2	3	4	5
2	I understand the concept of groupthink, and try to avoid this situation.	1	2	3	4	5
3	I understand the difference between democratic, consensus, and unilateral decision making.	1	2	3	4	5
4	Choices I make are influenced by the potential regret or rejoicing associated with decisions selected.	1	2	3	4	5
5	I spend time researching and reflecting before making major decisions.	1	2	3	4	5
6	I consciously consider all people involved and the ramifications of a decision.	1	2	3	4	5
7	I tend to gravitate toward decisions that are low risk in outcome.	1	2	3	4	5
8	My personal bias on issues has little affect on decisions I make by myself or with others.	1	2	3	4	5
9	When making decisions, I feel I can predict or estimate the outcome of my decision.	1	2	3	4	5
10	I am confident of the decisions made with my input.	1	2	3	4	5
11	I know when it is appropriate to make decisions by myself, and with input from others.	1	2	3	4	5
12	I have knowledge of several decision making models.	1	2	3	4	5

After completing the survey, teachers reviewed the sum of their scores and

derived an average, based on the number of statements. Using the mean score as a benchmark, students realized this particular skill area was a personal strength, or an area in which plans for improvement would be developed. Teachers in the study were then divided into two groups, to analyze if there was any significant difference in self-assessment of decision making skills for those with less than five years experience, as compared with those having more than five years of experience.

Results

With a perfect score reflected as 5.0, overall participant self-assessment was above average ($M = 3.40$), with a standard deviation of 3.75 for teachers with less than five years teaching experience. Teachers with more than five years of experience had a mean score of 3.48, with a standard deviation of 5.0. Table 2 data illustrates mean, standard deviation (within and between comparison groups), and significance of comparisons (t test).

Table 2.
Decision Making Skills Comparison (N=101)

	Mean	Within Group SD	Comparison SD	t
Teachers < 5yrs.	3.40	3.75	3.93	.22
Teachers > 5yrs.	3.48	5.0		

$p < 0.5$

Comparing the mean scores indicates very little variance in teacher's perceptions of their decision making skills, regardless of teaching experience. Those with more experience did score slightly higher on the skill assessment survey. Also, it is noteworthy that the teachers with more experience (>5 years) had a greater variance of scores within their group ($SD=5.0$). A t test confirmed the difference between teachers with less than five years experience and those with more than five years of experience was statistically insignificant ($t = 0.22$).

Conclusion

The graduate students in the Teacher Leader program analyzed their decision making strengths and weaknesses. Strength areas were revealed, and teachers were encouraged to take advantage of their talents when involved in decision making. Strategies for positive, significant decision making were shared with other teachers during the course.

Survey participants also analyzed their weaknesses in making decisions. Plans were devised that addressed those weaknesses. Although the study participants self-assessments were above average in decision making skills, specific areas of weakness

indicate a continued need for focusing on this important leadership skill area.

Further study is indicated for this skill area. One opportunity for analyzing decision making skills more in-depth could involve peer assessment. Using the same survey, teachers' colleagues could be involved in evaluating teacher leader decision making skills. With that information, a comparison could be made of the teacher's perceptions and the colleague's perceptions. This would give the teacher leader additional information for analyzing strengths and weaknesses.

A study of decision making models could enhance the knowledge base for teacher leaders making decisions. Looking at models that define the differences between operational and professional decision making would be an additional area of study. Proactive versus reactive decision making could be studied, again, giving the teacher leader additional knowledge base information.

References

- Austin, M., & Harkins, D. (2008). Shifting spaces and emerging voices: Participation support, and conflict in one school administration team. *Early Education and Development, 19, 6, 907-940.*
- Beebe, S., & Masterson, J. (2002). *Group decision making*. Boston: Pearson.
- Barth, R. (2001). Teacher leader. *Phi Delta Kappa, 82, 443-449.*
- Berry, B., & Ginsberg, R. (1990). Creating lead teachers: From policy to implementation. *Phi Delta Kappa, 71, 616-621.*
- Bolman, L., & Deal, T. (1994). *Becoming a teacher leader: From isolation to collaboration*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Bullmaster, M. L. & Cobb, V. L. (1995). Rethinking teacher leadership through professional schools. *Elementary School Journal, 96, 87-106.*
- Darling-Hammond, L. (1999, January-February). Educating teachers: The Academy's greatest failure or its most important future? *Academe 85, (1).*
- Day, C., & Harris, A. (2002). Teacher leadership, reflective practice and school improvement. In K. Leithwood & P. Hallinger (Eds.) *Second international handbook of educational leadership and administration (pp. 957-978)*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Farkas, S., Johnson, J. & Foleno (2000). *A sense of calling who teaches and why*. New York, NY: Public Agenda.
- Gabriel, J. (2005). *How to thrive as a teacher leader*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Glover, D., Miller, D., Gambling, M., Gough, G., & Johnson, M. (1999). As others see us: Senior management and subject staff perceptions of the work effectiveness of subject leaders in secondary schools. *School Leadership and Management, 19, 331-344.*
- Hackney, C. e., & Henderson, J. G. (1999). Educating school leaders for inquiry-based democratic learning communities. *Educational Horizons, 772(2), 67-73.*

- Hill, M. S. (1995). Educational leadership cohort models: Changing the talk to change the walk. *Planning and Changing*, 26(3/4), 179-189.
- Katzenmeyer, M., & Moller, G. (2001). *Awakening the sleeping giant, helping teachers develop as leaders*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Koppich, J.E. (2001). *Investing in teaching*. Washington, DC: National Alliance of Business.
- Lieberman, A., Saxl, E. R., & Miles, M. B. (2000). Teacher leadership: Ideology and practice. In *The Jossey-Bass Reader on Educational Leadership* (pp. 339-345). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Marks, H. M., & Louis, K. S. (1997). Does teacher empowerment affect the classroom? The implications of teacher empowerment for teachers' instructional practice and student academic performance. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 19(3), 245-275.
- McCay, L., Flora, J., Hamilton, A., & Riley, J. F. (2001). Reforming schools through teacher leadership: A program for classroom teachers as agents of change. *Educational Horizons*, 79, 135-142.
- Miles, M.B., Saxl, E.R., & Lieberman, A. (1988). What skills do educational "change agents" need? An empirical view. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 18, 157-193.
- Milken, L. (2000). *Teaching as the opportunity: The Teacher Advancement Program*. Santa Monica, CA: Milken Family Foundation. Available at <http://www.mff.org/publications/publications.taf>.
- Miller, L., & O'Shea, C. (1992). Learning to lead: Portraits of practice. In A. Lieberman (Ed.), *The changing contexts of teaching: Ninety-first yearbook of the National Society for the Study of teaching* (pp. 197-211). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Muijs, D., & Harris, A. (2003). Teacher leadership: Improvement through empowerment? An overview of the literature. *Educational Management & Administration*, 31, 437-448.
- National Commission on Teaching & America's Future. (1996). *What matters most: Teaching for America's future*. New York, NY.
- Roby, D. (2009). *Pursuing leadership potential: Becoming respected contributors within the workplace*. Acton, MA: XanEdu Publishing.
- Sola, P. (1984). *Ethics, education, and administrative decisions*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Spradlin, T. (2003). *A lexicon of decision making*. Retrieved online at <http://faculty.fuqua.Duke.edu/daweb/lexicon.htm>.
- Tyson, H. (1993). *Who will teach the children?* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Troen, V. & Boles, K. C. (1993), November 3). Teacher leadership: How to make it more than a catch phrase. *Teacher Magazine*.

Wesley, P. A. (1991). *Teachers who lead: The rhetoric of reform and the realities of practice*.

New York: Teachers College Press.

Copyright of Leadership & Organizational Management Journal is the property of Franklin Publishing Company and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.