

Developing a Specialist Degree for Teacher Leaders

Margaret Dalton, PhD
Professor of Educational Leadership
Southeast Missouri State University
Cape Girardeau, MO

Ray Dowdy, PhD
Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership
Southeast Missouri State University
Cape Girardeau, MO

Abstract

The idea of teacher leadership has exploded in school districts and is quickly becoming a popular degree program at universities. One Midwestern University strove to meet the needs of its constituents by implementing a specialist degree in Educational Leadership Development (Teacher Leadership) in the Fall semester of 2005. The thirty hour degree program consisted of twelve hours of professional development coursework and eighteen hours of core courses taught by University faculty. The University had previously developed partnership agreements with seventy-five school districts reaching approximately 8500 teachers to offer professional development courses taught on school district campuses collaboratively with district personnel. The development of the specialist degree in teacher leadership was a natural outgrowth of these partnerships. Higher Educational proved to be the missing link to improving teacher leadership.

The idea of teacher leadership has exploded in school districts and is quickly becoming a popular degree program at universities. One Midwestern University in the United States strove to meet the needs of its constituents by implementing a Specialist Degree in Educational Leadership Development (teacher leadership) in the fall of 2005. The 30 hour degree program consisted of twelve hours of professional development coursework and eighteen hours of core courses taught by University faculty. The university had previously developed partnership agreements with 75 school districts reaching approximately 8500 teachers to offer professional development courses taught on school district campuses collaboratively with district personnel. The development of the Specialist Degree in Educational Leadership Development was a natural outgrowth of these partnerships.

Through working with school districts and teachers in the partnership districts, it became apparent that outstanding teachers desired a higher education degree that would help them become better teacher leaders. Teachers who had no desire to leave the classroom but did have the desire to lead other teachers needed an option for higher

education. Providing a specialist degree for teacher leaders focused on school improvement gave teachers the necessary skills, knowledge, and dispositions to advocate for continuous improvement in instruction and student learning.

In the specialist degree, core courses were taught with two tracks: one for the administration student and one for the teacher leadership student. This accomplished two goals: 1) teachers and administrators were taught to work together to develop an instructional mission for student achievement; 2) student numbers in specialist level courses were increased. A specialist degree is a high level degree that requires the student to have already completed a master's degree. Therefore, often enrollment in specialist degree programs is low. Combining some courses in the teacher leadership and the administration programs helped to keep course numbers high.

Literature

Teacher leadership can be defined as bringing together the principal and teacher in a mutual mission of improving student learning (Scherer, 2007). Teacher leadership is about principals and teachers sharing the role of instructional leader. An outstanding teacher is an expert in the classroom and has instructional knowledge to share with other teachers. Teacher leadership builds on the classroom expertise of the outstanding teacher (Scherer, 2007). Teachers take on many roles both inside and outside the classroom that focus their instructional knowledge on school improvement.

Teacher leaders in general can be identified by ten roles: resource provider, instructional specialist, curriculum specialist, classroom supporter, learning facilitator, mentor, school leader, data coach, catalyst for change, and learner (Harrison & Killion, 2007). Teachers show leadership in many ways both formally and informally. Teacher leaders shape the culture of their school, improve student learning, and help peers become better teachers. Asking an outstanding teacher to move beyond the comfort of the classroom can be daunting for the teacher. Providing training for teacher leaders is the key to effective school improvement.

Teachers are being asked to take on leadership roles without being given the necessary training to successfully carry out these new roles. The basic assumption that outstanding teachers of students will also be outstanding teacher leaders is flawed. A teacher leader needs training to become a good teacher of teachers. Working with adults requires a different set of skills than working with children. Leading colleagues can be intimidating for teachers. When outstanding teachers were asked in what areas they needed additional training, the responses were: understanding education policy, working collaboratively with education policy makers and interpreting education research (Dozier, 2007). Teacher leaders need to be provided the opportunity for training and further professional development to successfully fill newly acquired leadership roles. Teachers today juggle many responsibilities beyond the traditional roles of classroom teacher.

Teacher leaders and administrators working together can bring about change to improve the instruction in a school. Teachers often serve in a school district longer than administrators and thus have a valuable knowledge base about educational practices that work and do not work in the environment. As teachers grow in their jobs, they often

develop a desire to collaborate and learn from one another. They may desire new challenges or assignments where they can influence change. Perhaps the most important factor in a child's education is having a good teacher. By asking outstanding teachers to help improve the education standards in a school, good teachers are not leaving the classroom (Scherer, 2007). Instead, teacher leaders are being created and thus the education of the whole school is being improved.

A cultural shift in schools where teachers are viewed as leaders and the norm is no longer for teachers to work in isolation must take place before teacher leadership will have an effect on school improvement. Both teachers and principals will need training to accept this new paradigm of shared leadership. Teacher leaders who are formally recognized as leaders have a greater impact on school decisions (Seashore Louis, Leithwood et al, 2010). Teacher leaders know that a collaborative learning environment focuses on continuous improvement in teaching and learning.

The literature base for teacher leadership is emerging and expanding. Much of the current literature is anecdotal. However, a research base is beginning to be established. Several books on teacher leadership have been published recently and articles are being published. A group of educators took the current research base along with experts in the field and developed standards for teacher leadership. The Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium developed the *Teacher Leader Model Standards* which consist of seven domains describing the multiple dimensions of teacher leadership.

- Domain I: Fostering a collaborative culture to support educator development and student learning
- Domain II: Accessing and using research to improve practice and student learning
- Domain III: Promoting professional learning for continuous improvement
- Domain IV: Facilitating improvements in instruction and student learning
- Domain V: Promoting the use of assessments and data for school and district improvement
- Domain VI: Improving outreach and collaboration with families and community
- Domain VII: Advocating for student learning and the profession (Teacher Leader Model Standards, p. 9)

The purpose of the standards was to provoke conversation among all stakeholders about what knowledge, skills, and competencies teachers need to become leaders. The teacher leader standards follow a similar format to the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISSLC) and were cross-referenced to the ISSLC standards.

Thus far teacher leadership is a fairly informal process. Some universities are beginning to offer degree programs and four states: Louisiana, Georgia, Kentucky, and Illinois are adding endorsements to state licensing systems (Teacher Leader Model

Standards, p. 25). Teacher leadership has the underpinnings to make a difference in student achievement and in the work lives of teachers and administrators.

Partnerships and Variable Topics Courses

The first step in developing the Specialist Degree in Educational Leadership Development was for the university to develop 75 partnerships with school districts in the service region reaching approximately 8500 teachers. The partnerships were developed to deliver professional development to teachers. The professional development of public school educators is an ongoing concern for both public schools and university faculty. School districts try to accomplish meaningful professional development by providing activities that allow teachers to grow in the areas of content, classroom management, and a myriad of customized needs of individual faculty members that enhance the district mission and vision. With high stakes accountability for the teacher, principal, and school district, it is important to provide professional development needed for the individuals and districts to enhance student achievement and success.

Starting with the spring semester of 2004, the university began providing educators in the service region the opportunity to enroll in professional development programs that qualify for graduate credit. These professional development hours were transcript hours that may be part of the degree program in educational leadership, counseling, secondary, middle school, elementary, early, and special education departments. Students benefit not only from the quality programs but also from reduced fees. Participants could complete up to 12 graduate hours in approved professional development programs which serve as electives for their degree programs and in some cases with advisor approval, these hours can replace a core course.

While the professional development graduate credit hours could be used in traditional degree programs such as a masters or specialist degree in school administration, it became apparent through working with the partnership school districts that teachers desired the opportunity to access the departmental programs to improve their teacher leadership abilities. A growing population of master teachers wanted a specialist degree option other than administration. The partnership program appeared to be a tipping point for increasing the number and quality of teacher leaders within the university service region. The development of a Specialist Degree in Educational Leadership Development was the natural outgrowth of the 75 partnership agreements.

Specialist in Educational Leadership Development

The Specialist Degree in Educational Leadership Development was developed to meet the needs of outstanding teachers and to lead to school improvement in the partnership districts. The Specialist Degree in Educational Leadership Development was based on the premise of introducing educators to the theories and current research that support innovative practices and effective teaching strategies in PK-12 school settings.

The implications of current school improvement efforts, issues, and trends in PK-12 education were explored throughout the coursework. The role of teachers as instructional leaders was emphasized as this role leads to improving classroom performance and student achievement.

The Educational Leadership Development degree was a 30 hour degree that does not lead to any certification. The coursework was designed to coordinate with already existing courses in the Specialist in Educational Administration degree program. Twelve hours of the degree consisted of Variable Topics courses which were professional development hours taught in collaboration with the partnership schools. The other 18 hours were core courses taught by faculty in the department. The program of study included: EA 716 Instructional Leadership Strategies I, EA 718 Instructional Leadership Strategies II, EA 737 Administration of Curriculum, EA 755 School District Law, EA 756 School Finance (finance for teachers), EA 785 School Plant Planning & Operation, and four EA 781 Variable Topics courses.

EA 781 and EA 782: Instructional Strategies I and II

The courses were specifically designed for candidates in the leadership development program. Both courses were designed to provide teacher leaders with an advanced understanding of the factors and processes related to teacher leadership in the PK-12 educational settings. The emphasis of the courses was improving classroom performance and student achievement as it related to school improvement efforts. Teacher leaders learned to apply their knowledge of educational theories and current research as it related to effective teaching strategies and innovative practices.

The two instructional strategies courses were taught only to teacher leadership candidates with the primary focus of school improvement. Future teacher leaders were exposed to a broad spectrum of issues and topics that helped develop the necessary dispositions, knowledge, and skills needed to become leaders of school improvement. Teacher leader candidates were given opportunities for guided practice and reflection during the two instructional strategies courses and the rest of the degree program. Teacher leader and administrative candidates were taught to work together to bring about effective school improvement.

Each of the courses below was redesigned for the teacher leader with the specific goal of school improvement in mind. Each of the courses incorporated supporting strategies suggested in the *Teacher Leader Model Standards*.

EA737: Administration of Curriculum

The course was designed to prepare the aspiring and practicing teacher leader for the responsibilities at the school building level in the proper development of curricula. The teacher leader will be able to research findings in educational literature to identify trends in curriculum change and be able to understand the components of a district curriculum. Teacher leaders focus on school improvement by learning to relate the implications of national and state legislative decisions regarding curriculum to local school or district policy and procedures. Teacher leaders are given the opportunity to

practice leadership in the planning, development, implementation, and evaluation of curriculum at the district, school, and classroom level. Teacher leaders will be better able to lead school improvement if they understand the trends and issues resulting from current education reforms, standards, mandates, and grassroots movements. During the course, teacher leader candidates will relate the development of the district mission, improvement planning, needs assessment, and student achievement to the development of curriculum.

Strategies specifically suggested in the *Teacher Leader Model Standards* that were incorporated in this course were:

- Create new “hybrid” roles for teachers, in which they can remain in their classrooms at least part of the time, but also serve in such roles as instructional coaches, curriculum coordinators, teacher facilitators, and mentors;
- Promote shared or distributed leadership structures within schools that provide teachers with input into school policies, curriculum, and professional development;
- Provide teachers with common planning time, job-embedded professional development opportunities, and released time to collaborate with peers; and
- Recognize the contributions of teacher leadership to improving student learning.
(p. 27)

EA755: School District Law

The course was designed as a study of law that includes the basic fields of contracts, property, torts, constitutional law, and other areas of law that directly affect the educational and administrative processes of the educational system. The school law course for teacher leaders covers a general knowledge of school law including: relationship of religion and church to state; school attendance; law's effect on the instructional program and school operations; constitutional issues of desegregation; torts in school settings; governmental immunity and liability; certification, personnel contracts, and tenure; due process rights of teachers and students; and discrimination issues in employment. The teacher leader understands the evolving nature of teaching and learning and knows how to align school improvement with legal issues.

Strategies specifically suggested in the *Teacher Leader Model Standards* that were incorporated in this course were:

- Advocate for federal and state legislation and grant programs such as the Teacher Incentive Fund, Teacher Quality Partnerships, and Investment in Innovation Funds that will train all stakeholders to recognize the potential of teacher leadership, support new school leadership structures, and advance teacher leadership opportunities;

- Encourage the removal of barriers to the mobility of teacher leadership credentials among states; and
- Develop local, state, and national-level networks of teacher leaders to share practices and provide support to one another. (p. 32-33)

EA756: Finance for Teachers

The course was designed to prepare the aspiring and practicing teacher leader for the responsibilities of financial management at the building level of leadership in public schools. The course includes theoretical concepts and practical skills necessary for successful teacher leadership in the realm of finance. Emphasis on building budgets using state, local, and federal funds. The teacher leader is prepared to apply Missouri's funding plan for public elementary and secondary schools. The teacher leader is taught to apply technology to financial management procedures of the school district; to apply the processes of planning, developing, communicating to publics, implementing, changing, and evaluating a budget; to apply the processes of financial accounting, auditing, and reporting; and to apply school finance concepts. An ability to apply the theoretical concepts underlying school finance and the translation of concepts to policy and procedures helps teacher leaders shape school improvement.

Strategies specifically suggested in the *Teacher Leader Model Standards* that were incorporated in this course were:

- Develop systems for reward and recognition of the contributions of teachers in formal and informal leadership roles;
- Establish compensation systems that recognize teacher leadership roles, knowledge, and skills;
- Establish a performance management and evaluation system that is consistent with the identified and varied roles of teacher leaders;
- Implement at the local, state, and national level standards-based assessment/evaluation systems to create the groundwork for differentiated career paths, teacher leader credentials, and professional pay systems;
- Develop a compendium of "best practices" that illustrates how schools and districts can reallocate resources and dedicate time to promote shared decision-making structures within schools which support teacher leadership (p. 31-33).

EA785: School Plant Planning and Operation

This course provided teacher leaders the fundamental concepts of planning, designing and constructing new educational facilities and/or the rehabilitation, remodeling or modernization of existing facilities. Additionally, the course includes

operation and maintenance programs. Part of school improvement is understanding staffing patterns, student grouping, and organizational structures relative to planning facilities which will be supportive of teaching and learning. Teacher leaders learn to interpret federal, state, and local health regulations and guidelines including ADA in the development of learning facilities. During the course teacher leader candidates analyze special education program requirements and other special needs. Helping teacher leaders learn to develop sound economical maintenance and efficient operation programs will lead to school improvement.

Strategies specifically suggested in the *Teacher Leader Model Standards* that were incorporated in this course were:

- Re-think time, space, scheduling, and other support structures within schools to facilitate collaboration among teachers;
- Provide opportunities for dialogue among teachers and administrators about which school improvement strategies will best optimize student learning in the specific contexts of the school and district; and
- Foster openness within schools to new ideas and innovative practices by promoting classroom and school-based action research. (p. 28-29)

EA781: Educational Administration-Variable Topics II

The course was a directed study of professional development topics, issues, and trends in public schools. The course was taught through seminars and forums. Teacher leadership candidates were given the opportunity to apply proactive, interactive, and participatory leadership to appropriate situations that lead to school improvement. Opportunities for guided practice were provided in the areas of instructional leadership, organizational skills, and delegation of authority. Teacher leaders were able to apply the basic concepts of the change process by participating in the following activities: developing a comprehensive school improvement plan; developing an assessment of needs, goal setting, and evaluation for school improvement; build and maintain a positive school climate; monitor, evaluate, and handle data regarding the progress and work of others; participate in professional growth activities that enhance the development of a learning community; exhibit effective problem-solving and decision-making skills that will enhance student learners; and manipulate factors affecting the school's learning environment to improve student learning. Giving teacher leaders the knowledge, understanding, and application strategies for promoting and maintaining a positive school climate and culture will help lead to school improvement.

Strategies specifically suggested in the *Teacher Leader Model Standards* that were incorporated in this course were:

- Prepare teachers who wish to serve as teacher leaders in adult learning theory and the development of strategies, structures, and skills to provide feedback on teaching and student learning, to provide instructional coaching to colleagues, and to facilitate team-based approaches to teacher induction;
- Provide ongoing professional development to experienced teachers in how to access research about effective teaching practice, utilize new technologies to teach and communicate with colleagues, and apply adult learning theory to facilitate working with colleagues;
- Provide supportive environments in schools that encourage teachers to engage in informal leadership roles thereby creating a “pipeline” for future teacher leaders. (p. 29-30)

Admission requirements for the specialist in Educational Leadership Development were similar to other specialist degree programs in the College of Education and required both a master’s degree and a valid teaching certificate. Students in the program were required to maintain a professional portfolio which was used to determine the candidates overall quality of work while completing the degree program. The portfolio was presented to a panel of professors as the comprehensive exit examination.

Conclusions

We can strengthen school leadership and improve student learning by supporting the varied roles of teacher leaders. As university faculty and school leaders we should identify and support those school leaders who are engaging in professional relationships that are fostering instructional improvement; support teacher lead groups which have the ability to develop innovations; fund the purposeful learning and shared practice of the teacher leader; and treat the teacher leader as a full partner in the leadership process (Donaldson, 2007). The Specialist Degree in Educational Leadership Development strives to accomplish the above goals through the professional development courses and the university taught courses. It is important for university faculty to continue to train excellent school administrators and it is important for university faculty to start to train excellent teacher leaders.

Teacher leaders know firsthand how to improve student learning and how to reform schools. They need a specific set of skills, dispositions, and knowledge to be effective teacher leaders (Dozier, 2007) in order to affect school reform and improve student learning. Universities can help teachers become leaders by providing the first step in the training process. Southeast Missouri State University has taken the first step in providing a specialist degree for teacher leaders. The response has been overwhelmingly positive from the teachers and the partnership school districts. Giving outstanding teachers the skill set they need to be teacher leaders can lead to school improvement.

Universities can play an important part in providing the needed professional development to administrators and other stakeholders to learn how to create and support teacher leadership in schools. Teacher leadership will help improve student learning when collaboration and shared leadership among teachers, teacher leaders, and administrators are the norm. Redesigning principal preparation programs to allow for the collaboration among principals, teacher leaders and teachers is one step universities can take toward the preparation of teacher leaders and school improvement. Teacher preparation programs can also prepare teachers to take on differentiated roles and encourage teachers to become part of the leadership structures for school improvement.

References

- Donaldson, G.A. (2007). What do teachers bring to leadership? *Educational Leadership*, 65(1). Retrieved from [leadership/sept07/vol65/num01/What-Do-Teachers-Bring-to-Leadership % C2%A2.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educationalleadership/sept07/vol65/num01/What-Do-Teachers-Bring-to-Leadership%20A2.aspx)
- Dozier, T.K. (2007). Turning good teachers into great leaders. *Educational Leadership*, 65(1), 54-59. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educationalleadership/sept07/vol65/num01/Turning-Good-Teachers-into-Great-Leaders.aspx>
- Harrison, C. & Killion, J. (2007). Ten roles for teacher leaders. *Education Leadership*, 65(1). Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educationalleadership/sept07/vol65/num01/Ten-Roles-for-Teacher-Leaders.aspx>
- Louis, K.S., Leithwood, K, Wahlstrom, K.L, & Anderson, S.E. (2010). *Learning from Leadership: Investigating the links to improved student learning*. Final Report to the Wallace Foundation Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota. Retrieved from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/Pages/appendences-learning-from-leadership.aspx>
- Scherer, M. (2007). Playing to strengths. *Educational Leadership*, 65(1), 7. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educationalleadership/sept07/vol65/num01/Playing-to-Strengths.aspx>
- Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium. (2011). *Teacher Leader Model Standards*. Retrieved from http://www.teacherleaderstandards.org/downloads/TLS_Brochure_sm.pdf