Teacher Leadership in Professional Learning Communities

such as Networks

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Introduction

Over the past thirty years, significant research has been conducted in the area of teacher leadership (Harris, 2005; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001, p. 17) define teacher leadership as follows: "Teachers who are leaders lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders, and influence others toward improved educational practice" (Harris, 2005, p. 204, 205). In their extensive review of the literature, York-Barr & Duke (2004) also point out that teacher leaders influence positively on teacher practice with the intention of improving student outcomes (p. 288). For educators, striving continuously for increased student achievement is our core purpose which must be sustained for all children. This goal is more likely to be realized collectively through the work of dedicated teacher leaders.

The teacher leader's responsibilities have evolved over the years and they differ depending on the school context and needs, and whether formal (i.e., department head) or informal titles are assigned. Teacher leaders' work may be varied and can include such tasks as administrative work, spearheading projects, and sharing knowledge and skills with colleagues (Firestone & Martinez, 2007; Frost & Harris, 2003). Recently, research emphasis has focussed on exploring the impact of teacher leaders on the instructional practices of staff in professional learning communities (Firestone & Martinez, 2007). For the purpose of this paper, I will discuss research around the teacher leader's role within professional learning communities such as networked learning communities, which is a recent trend in collaborative teaching cultures.

Networked learning communities (NLCs) originated in Britain as a research and development initiative by the National College of School Leadership from 2000 to 2006 (Fox, Haddock & Smith, 2007, p. 288). Schools were grouped in clusters to form networks designed to "support school improvement through collaborative inquiry" (Chapman, 2008, p. 403) in order to "further both pupil and teacher learning" (Fox, Haddock & Smith, 2007, p. 288). Some boards in

Ontario, funded by the Ministry of Education, have adopted NLCs in which school teams collaborate in supportive, professional learning communities to gain additional knowledge of rich instructional practices and assessment strategies to improve student achievement. Teacher leaders work alongside school leadership teams to scaffold new learning for staff through modeled, shared and guided practice on an ongoing basis in order to foster collaboration, build capacity and sustain precise and effective instructional practices (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009).

Although considerable research is still being conducted in the area of teacher leadership, there remains a gap in the literature with regards to how exactly teacher leaders impact on their colleagues and on student outcomes (Firestone & Martinez, 2007; Harris, 2005; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Notwithstanding, there are considerable claims regarding that "the strongest effects of teacher leadership have been on teacher leaders themselves" (Barth (2001) as quoted in York-Barr & Duke, 2004, p. 282). For the purposes of this paper, I will endeavour to explore the impact teacher leaders, who belong to NLCs, have on their colleagues and on student achievement.

Who are teacher leaders?

To gain a better understanding of and appreciation for the role teacher leaders play in the educational arena, I will outline some of the key dimensions of this type of leadership that have emerged in the research. Teacher leaders have broad skill sets and characteristics that set them apart from others (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). A review of the research highlights some significant traits they need to possess in order to perform their role effectively:

> excellent teaching skills, extensive knowledge of leaching and learning,…creative, innovative, …take risks, …respected and valued by colleagues…strong administrative and organizational skills,…build trust and rapport with colleagues, establish solid relationships, work collaboratively, influence school culture through relationships, supportive of colleagues, promote growth among colleagues, effective in communicating, including good listening skills, handle conflict, can negotiate and mediate, ability to deal with process, effective group processing skills, ability to assess, interpret and prioritize district and teacher needs and concerns. (York-Barr & Duke, 2004, p. 267).

These traits provide the foundation upon which teacher leaders can re-culture the school in order to move staff forward, deepen their learning for improved instructional strategies, build relationships, and build trust among colleagues (Harris, 2005, 207).

What are Networked Learning Communities?

Although a fairly new phenomenon in Canada, NLCs, which are a specific type of professional learning community, have been implemented in some Ontario school boards over the past several years. These boards have adopted the United Kingdom model of professional learning in order to bring about system-wide reform through focussed, sustained professional development along with capacity building and distributive leadership. In NLCs, teachers from different schools come together to learn from one another, cement relationships based on trust, and critically engage in higher levels of discourse about pedagogy (Fox, Haddock & Smith, 2007; Chapman, 2008). NLCs are focussed on "pupil" and "adult" learning, purposeful and sustained through ongoing collaboration in "school to school" learning contexts to create new knowledge (Fox, Haddock & Smith, 2007, 288; Jackson & Temperley, 2007; Katz & Earl, 2010). According to Katz and Earl (2007), this "learning and the creation of new knowledge by teachers and principals [and/or] headteachers leads to deep conceptual changes and new ways of working in schools and classrooms" (p. 28). It is the teacher leaders who form the "links" between schools and networks and are charged with "uploading and downloading" knowledge so that the new learning can be imparted on an ongoing basis to others on staff in order to build capacity (Katz and Earl, 2010, p. 42, 48). The focus is on purposeful learning and inquiry, capacity building, distributive leadership, relationships and leadership, which are key elements of NLCs and distinguish them from other forms of professional learning communities (Katz & Earl, 2007; 2010; Sharratt and Fullan, 2009; Jackson and Temperley, 2007). Much of the literature encompassing networks describes the impact they have on realizing system-wide reform, change in teacher pedagogy, and improved student achievement through teacher leadership and capacity-building models (Sharratt and Fullan, 2009; City, Elmore, Fiarman & Teitel, 2009; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Harris and Jones, 2010, Katz & Earl; 2010). Although a fairly new professional development model in Canada, NLCs mirror the collaborative framework in England where the belief in system reform lies in school-to-school learning, shifting beyond the

traditional boundaries of individual schools (Jackson & Temperley, 2007; Harris and Jones, 2010).

The subsequent sections outline important components of authentic networked learning communities and the important role the teacher leader plays in promoting and sustaining this type of professional learning community in order to create conditions which challenge existing strategies and thinking for improved pedagogical practices.

Teacher Leaders in Networked Learning Communities

Learning networks can serve as a powerful catalyst for teacher leaders to impact school-wide teacher practices:

> Through collaborating with teachers in other schools, engaging in trials
> of new teaching approaches, disseminating their findings to colleagues, and
> engaging in action research, the potential for teacher leadership has been
> shown to be significantly enhanced.
> (Darling-Hammond et al., 1995 as quoted in Harris, 2005, 213)

One-time or sporadic professional development has traditionally not been as successful in inspiring change among teacher practice as has job-embedded learning through networks (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009; City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009). Therefore, this notion of teacher leadership in NLCs must be nurtured to contribute to the school's collective professional development to an extent that can be maintained over time. These teacher leaders are able to carry out the work of the networks and impart best practices through the trust and respect they gain by experimenting with their own professional learning in the networks (Fox et al., 2007). Consequently, they are able to more confidently disseminate and share new learning with their own colleagues after having practiced the strategies firsthand. The research of Earl and Katz (2007, 2009 & 2010) further justifies the vital role teacher leaders possess in enabling changes in thinking and practice by being situated in both the schools and the networks. In fact, Jopling and Spender's (2006) research and data collection on networks yielded important insights into capacity building and distributive leadership in NLCs. Jopling and Spender (2006) showed that teacher leaders found it necessary to encourage other teachers to take on leadership roles so that

more staff could transfer the learning back to their respective schools. Data illustrated favourable outcomes for school staff as a result of "exposure" to other schools in the system working on similar initiatives (Jopling & Spender, 2006, p. 20). Overall, teacher leaders are the gatekeepers of new learning since they are afforded the opportunities to learn alongside other teachers and network with other leaders, thus broadening their learning as well as building capacity among staff at school (Fox, Haddock and Smith, 2007, 288, 302).

Studies have supported that teacher leaders, who are well-respected and knowledgeable, have been able to inspire others and build capacity among staff to hone leadership potential in others (Fox et al., 2007; Katz & Earl, 2010). In NLCs, choosing the right leaders is a key ingredient for building capacity, distributing the leadership, and creating conditions that forge trusting relationships (Katz & Earl, 2007; Sharratt and Fullan, 2009; Jackson and Temperley, 2007; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Jopling & Spender, 2006). Respect and trust will allow teacher leaders to be perceived as equals in the eyes of their colleagues rather than individuals who possess power over staff (Harris, 2005; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). For school leaders, this underscores the importance of choosing the right teacher leaders – those who are respected, trusted, persevere, and who remain optimistic and resilient in order to impact teacher efficacy, supporting in turn the role of the principal in improving student outcomes: "When it comes to instructional leadership, research finds that this kind of work is in fact done more often by others [informal leaders] in the school than by principals" (Earl & Katz, 2009, p. 61).

Supporting Teacher Leaders

Certain conditions can impede the teacher leader's ability to realize positive change in staff practice. Lack of time is cited in the literature as a common obstacle (Harris, 2005; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).   Studies have also pointed to another common barrier teacher leaders encounter – the feeling of isolation as a result of being perceived as a leader in the school. The "egalitarian ethic of colleagues" can imply that these informal leaders have more power than their counterparts; a perception that creates problems in relationship building within what is perceived by other teachers as a hierarchal structure (Harris, 2005; York-Barr & Duke, 2004, 272). Much can be done to alleviate these apparent barriers for teacher leaders so that they can forge ahead with their important work.

To overcome the first obstacle, extra time is required during the day to allow teacher leaders to pursue their own professional learning, plan professional development for staff, and conference with or support staff in the classroom (Katz & Earl, 2010; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). In addressing the second barrier, a significant factor encouraging teacher leaders' ability to transform instructional practices is a school culture that values and welcomes innovation, distributive leadership and change. Within this type of culture, teacher leaders feel supported and accepted, and believe that others see their work as legitimate (Firestone & Martinez, 2007; Frost & Harris, 2003; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).
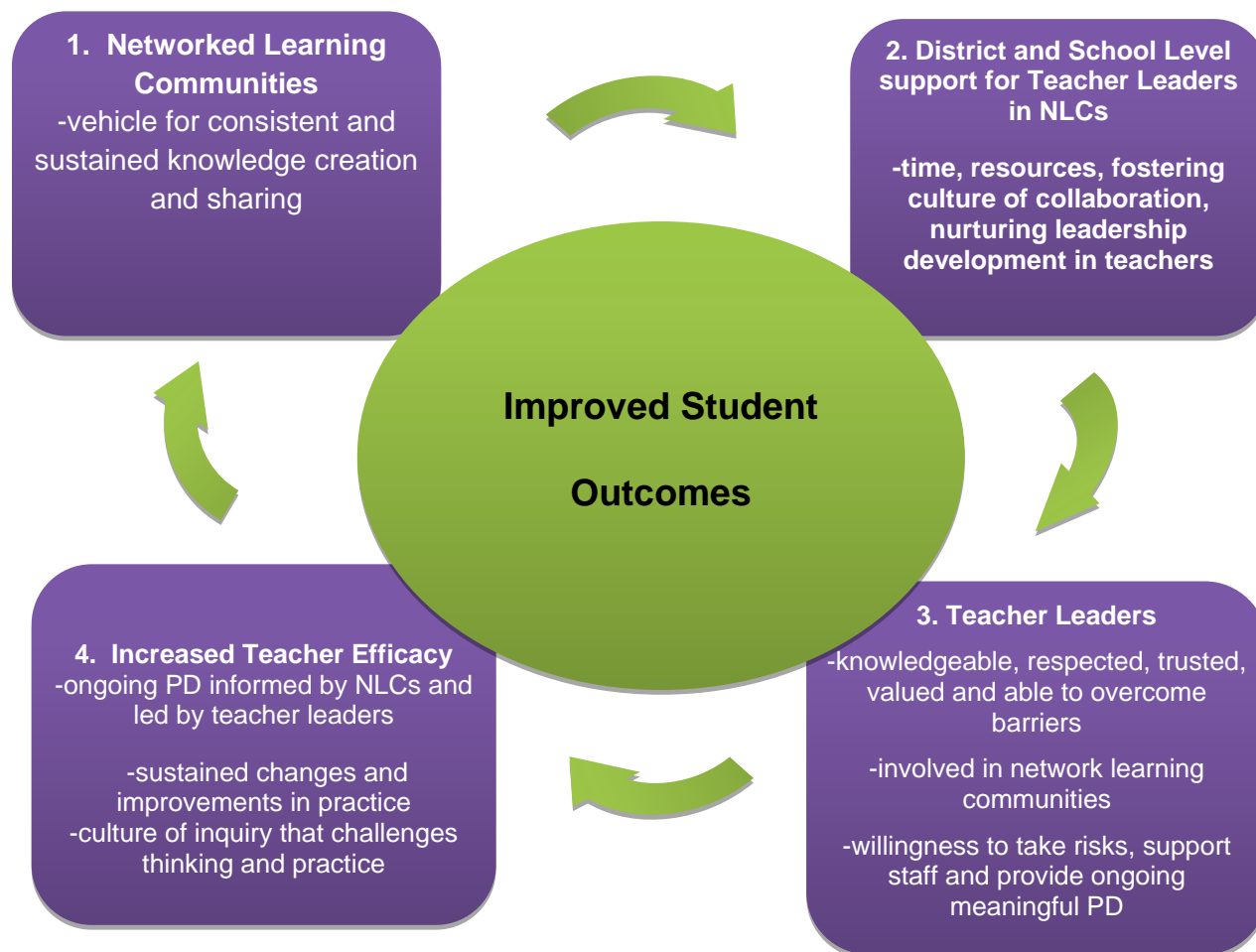
In addition, studies have shown that investing money for professional development in the area of curriculum and, more importantly, in the development of leadership skills such as interpersonal, coaching and mentoring skills, will yield many short- and long-term benefits for these teacher leaders (Firestone & Martinez, 2007; Harris, 2005; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Educators must not lose sight of the potential impact teacher leaders may have on teacher practice, an impact that can ultimately lead to enhanced student outcomes. Time and money need to be invested in honing their skills at coaching, mentoring, and providing emotional intelligence training (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009; Sharratt and Fullan, 2009). This process enables these informal leaders to build their confidence and skill sets in dealing with a variety of teacher learning styles and needs, and ultimately impact teacher pedagogy within their schools. Districts that invest time and money in nurturing teacher leadership will benefit from the role these informal leaders play in furthering system reform efforts towards improved student success (Firestone & Martinez, 2007).

A Framework for Teacher Leadership in NLCs

The framework shown in Figure 1 depicts how networked learning communities support teacher leaders' work to positively impact on staff efficacy, which may in turn improve student outcomes. The following framework, which suggests a theory of action for teacher leadership in NLCs, is grounded in the literature. It outlines key understandings of teacher leaders with respect to their work in networks. It suggests a cyclical path for teacher leaders in order for them to impact on staff efficacy, leading to positive student outcomes. I chose a cyclical path rather

than a linear one because I believe learning is ongoing and the network generates the new knowledge which cycles through the stages depicted in Figure 1.

  The framework comprises five major components. The first element depicts how NLCs serve as a foundation to further develop teacher leaders' knowledge and expertise through ongoing professional development and job-embedded work. The NLCs provide a forum for teacher leaders to share innovative and high-yield practises, grounded in research and proven to impact on teacher practice. The second element depicts important conditions required by districts and schools to nurture teacher leadership in order to ensure the work of the networks is carried on by teacher leaders in different school communities. The literature on teacher leadership stresses the importance of creating a school culture whereby teacher leadership is valued and supported through resources, time, and ongoing investment in nurturing this type of leadership among teachers. A third critical component to the success of NLCs is the role of teacher leaders in creating the necessary conditions to challenge the collective thinking and practices of teachers required so as to enhance teacher efficacy and thereby improve student learning. The literature points to strong teacher leadership as a catalyst for change in staff practice. Teacher leaders need to possess certain leadership qualities, and must find innovative ways to impart their learning to colleagues on an on-going basis. The fourth component is significant if any meaningful change is to be achieved. If teacher leaders can successfully develop and improve individual and collective pedagogical strategies within their school communities to meet the diverse needs of the student population, then students will ultimately benefit from the learning process.

Figure 1

1. **Networked Learning Communities**
   -vehicle for consistent and sustained knowledge creation and sharing

2. **District and School Level support for Teacher Leaders in NLCs**
   -time, resources, fostering culture of collaboration, nurturing leadership development in teachers

3. **Teacher Leaders**
   -knowledgeable, respected, trusted, valued and able to overcome barriers
   -involved in network learning communities
   -willingness to take risks, support staff and provide ongoing meaningful PD

4. **Increased Teacher Efficacy**
   -ongoing PD informed by NLCs and led by teacher leaders
   -sustained changes and improvements in practice
   -culture of inquiry that challenges thinking and practice

Improved Student Outcomes

Conclusion

Professional learning communities such as networks have brought about significant change in pedagogy through shared purpose, supportive and trusting relationships, and ongoing learning, which has impacted positively on student achievement and improved teacher effectiveness (Harris & Jones, 2010; Sharratt & Fullan, 2009). Through network learning communities, the teacher leaders' role has evolved, and now these leaders play a critical role in working alongside administrators to provide ongoing professional development opportunities for staff. Teacher leadership in networks creates many tangible benefits for staff and students.

Teacher leaders involved in networks validate teachers' learning, bring alignment and focus to their work, build confidence, develop a sense of purpose among staff, and provide on-going meaningful and purposeful professional development directed at school needs. Ongoing job-embedded professional development among teacher leaders in different schools is a key component of NLCs. Teacher leaders' participation in networks allows them to provide timely and meaningful professional development in their respective schools in order to support the teaching staff. Teacher leaders can consistently challenge staff-thinking to employ high-yield strategies and differentiated instruction, thereby providing meaningful learning opportunities for all students in order to promote increased achievement and engagement.

When teachers improve upon individual and collective "efficacy," they can effectively and confidently use appropriate instructional strategies to facilitate high levels of student achievement and engagement. This will encourage students to actively participate and cognitively engage in the learning task (City, Elmore, Fiarman, Teitel, 2009). Hence, the network is a vehicle to support ongoing professional learning, but, more importantly, we need to continue to find ways to encourage strong teacher leadership within schools; leadership that can positively impact overall on teacher efficacy and student outcomes.

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