NCSL National College for School Leadership

Teacher Leadership:
A review of the research

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In this paper, the authors explore the concept of distributed, or teacher leadership, in contrast to the traditional notion of leadership in schools which focused largely on the responsibilities of the headteacher. Harris and Muijs set out to review international research literature on teacher leadership, and examined the evidence in terms of implications for professional development and school effectiveness by:

- exploring the differing definitions of teacher leadership
- examining the evidence about how teacher leadership can affect school and
- classroom improvement
- investigating barriers to teacher leadership
- identifying how it can be enhanced
- reflecting on areas needing further research and development

Key findings

- Effective leadership is not necessarily solely the responsibility of the headteacher, but can be dispersed within the school among the staff.
- The notion of distributed or teacher leadership is well developed and well grounded in research evidence in USA, Canada and Australia, but in Britain, conventional notions of leadership tend to prevail.
- Collaboration is at the heart of teacher leadership and to be effective it has to encompass mutual trust and support.
- Teachers who are leaders, lead within and beyond the classroom, not only in organisational aspects, but also in encouraging colleagues to move forward in their professional practice.
- Student outcomes are more likely to improve where leadership sources are distributed throughout the school community and where teachers are empowered in areas of importance to them.
- Teachers need support in developing their leadership roles, including professional development, which extends their skills in mentoring and teaching adults.

The evidence base: Where does the research come from?

There is wide acceptance of the importance of effective school leadership. Yet UK research literature largely focuses simply on the headteacher – 'the great man' theory prevails despite growing understanding of the importance of empowerment, organisational transformation and community building, and the advantages of dispersed leadership (eg MacBeath, *Effective School Leadership: Responding to Change*, 1998).

Research into distributive or teacher leadership is well developed in the USA, Canada and Australia. Literature from the USA explores the concept in terms of:

- shared goals
- the empowerment of all teachers to become leaders at various times
- a stronger drive for improvement

The authors report that a strong characteristic of leadership is that it is fluid and emergent, which implies a different power relationship from the traditional leader and follower pattern. There are opportunities for teachers to become leaders, and leadership is seen as a "shared and collective endeavour".

To inform this paper, the authors conducted an extensive literature search using library, internet and published bibliographies as sources. The majority of findings reported are from American studies.

What does teacher leadership involve?

In the USA, teacher leadership typically involves increased leadership and decision-making powers for teachers without taking them out of the classroom. This role is sometimes extended further, sharing some of the traditional school management roles. For example, selecting and purchasing resources, shaping the curriculum, designing professional development programmes and involvement in staff recruitment and appraisal. Current definitions of teacher leadership highlight the difference from traditional individual leadership, for example:

- causing change (eg Wasley, *Teachers Who Lead*, 1991: "The ability to encourage colleagues to change, to do things they wouldn't ordinarily consider without the influence of the leader")
- a collective approach, wherein teachers work collaboratively
- providing curriculum development knowledge, giving in-service training to colleagues and acting as mentor, curriculum specialist or coach
- organising and leading reviews of school practice
- instigating peer classroom observation
- undertaking action research
- participating in in-school decision making, as members of school improvement teams, or on joint committees with outside agencies

Harris herself has identified four dimensions of teacher leadership:

- brokering: managing how teachers translate the principles of school improvement into practice in their own classroom
- participative: ensuring teachers feel part of, and own, change and improvement (fostering collaborative ways of working)

- mediating: as a source of expertise and information, the teacher leader draws on additional expertise and external assistance
- relationships: forging closeness with individual teachers, to underpin mutual learning

There is in the literature a divergence between those who see teacher leaders as collaborators with senior management, and those (a minority) who see teacher leaders as fulfilling some of the functions of senior management, in part replacing them.

The important point emanating from the literature is that teacher leaders are, in the first place, expert teachers, who spend the majority of their time in the classroom, but take on different leadership roles at different times...The literature asserts that the principal reason for this is to transform schools into professional learning communities. (Harris and Muijs, 2002)

How teacher leadership can help to improve school effectiveness through collaboration and collegiality

One feature on which all researchers concur is the contribution of strong collegial relations to school improvement, where colleagues are supported in trying out new approaches and encouraged to take on leadership responsibilities of their own. The authors quote Rosenholtz (1989) who suggests that teacher collegiality and collaboration are a means of generating positive change in schools. Teacher leadership, by nature, implies moving away from hierarchical control to peer control and federal leadership, where authority is dispersed within the teaching community. A school with teacher leadership will be "tight on values, but loose on the freedom to act". Teachers need the conditions (including time) and the trust, to work collaboratively, to innovate, to develop and learn together, to provide better learning for students.

Student outcomes are more likely to improve when leadership is distributed throughout the school community and where teachers are empowered to take on leadership roles. Several studies of teacher attitudes also highlighted teachers' own beliefs that greater autonomy and participation among staff contributed to pupil learning. The nature of communication between teachers working together on a daily basis is a good indicator of organisational health. Teacher leadership implies a form of professional development and a view of the school as a learning community where teachers and students learn together. Other studies have noted that attempts to encourage pupils to function as critical and active citizens only make sense in a democratically run school.

Research on school effectiveness suggests that teacher leadership contributes to teacher effectiveness, through improved self-efficacy, which, in turn, benefits pupils. The literature points to the following benefits as factors in school improvement:

- encouragement of continuous learning by teachers
- spreading good practice between teachers
- increased teacher confidence
- higher teacher expectations
- higher teacher motivation
- greater ability to innovate in the classroom

The authors quote Leithwood and Jantzi (1998) who conclude that teacher leadership has far more impact on student learning than 'principal' leadership, and that for better teacher effectiveness and student engagement, schools should distribute more leadership activity to teachers.

Climatic conditions for the growth of teacher leadership

Studies have highlighted the need for:

- staff opinions to be clearly taken into account
- meetings of staff to be autonomous, but for effective group problem-solving to be established
- working conditions to accommodate collaborative planning and classroom visiting
- appropriate involvement in new initiatives
- opportunities for staff development

Teacher leaders need opportunity for continuous professional development (not just preparation, but follow-through) in order to develop their role and their skills in:

- mentoring
- teaching adults
- action research
- organisational diagnosis
- understanding and managing change

Barriers to teacher leadership are created in traditional hierarchies when senior management teams refuse to relinquish control, or headteachers are not prepared to become 'leaders of teachers.' Some studies also noted negative peer pressure, or the tendency of teacher leaders to feel isolated from their colleagues, with conflict between their leadership responsibilities and their needs for affiliation. They reported that teacher leaders were marginalised into 'grant chasing', or individual curriculum writing. Senior management need to be aware of these hazards, and to foster shared values and establish collaborative working patterns.

Formal training programmes for teacher leaders are now widely available, with additional elements on rapport building, finding and using resources, and building confidence in other teachers. All this, of course, must be in addition to up-to-date, high levels of pedagogic and subject knowledge.

Implications for policy-makers and practitioners

This review found clear links between teacher leadership and teacher learning. Teacher leadership has implications for:

- teacher professionalism
- teacher recruitment
- teacher retention
- teacher performance

These implications are especially relevant in the current UK context, which the authors characterise as:

- lacking time for collaboration
- focusing on attainment rather than learning
- seeing teachers as artisans rather than artists
- having limited opportunities for research and reflection

Teacher leadership offers one way of engaging the profession in activity highly likely to signal recognition, demonstrate trust and lead to reward. "At its most profound, teacher leadership

offers a new 'professionalism' based on mutual trust, recognition, empowerment and support. At its most practical, it provides a way of teachers working together in order to improve the learning experiences of young people. It reclaims leadership as a human, collective endeavour in which all teachers play an essential role."

Policy-makers could:

- investigate models of effective teacher leadership in the UK
- disseminate that good practice through its programmes and products
- evaluate the impact of introducing teacher leadership into different types of schools
- work with school leaders to ensure that the benefits in terms of recruitment and retention as well as pupil learning are well understood

The challenge for schools themselves is to generate the possibilities for, and expectation of, collaboration. Strategies will involve:

- providing time and support for research and enquiry
- removing structural barriers to collaboration
- a real redistribution of power
- agreement to uphold 'no blame' innovation

Research so far has focused on the characteristics of teacher leadership (reflection, collaboration, etc) but has taken little account of the *models* of school leadership needed to generate and sustain teacher learning and growth. Empirical evidence is needed on:

- how far 'teacher leadership' is meaningful in a wide variety of school contexts
- different forms of teacher leadership in practice
- how teacher leadership can best be facilitated and developed
- the relationship between teacher leadership and school improvement
- case studies and guidance on the conditions in which teacher leadership can thrive

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