Understanding, Defining, and Planning for Master Teacher Leadership

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I strongly believe that teaching is a calling. When I walk into my classroom each morning, I turn on lights, wash the boards only to rewrite on them the day’s agenda, homework, and other announcements. I complete my routine check of class computers for login readiness and make way to my desk, coffee in hand, to sit for the first and last time for the next eight hours. With self-satisfaction, I open my planner to review meeting times for the day and update lesson plans for the week and weeks ahead. And as I take my first sip of coffee, while sitting at my desk, I look up and into a learning space that fills me with pride.

I enjoy teaching for many reasons, but the fact that it forces me to be a lifelong learner is the primary reason I find so much satisfaction in the career. Roland S. Barth (2001) begins his book Learning By Heart by explaining that “Teachers and students go hand in hand as learners – or they don’t go at all” (p. 23). Everyday I am put to the challenge of learning new skills: new skills in interpersonal communication, new skills in problem solving, new skills in mentoring, new skills in organization, new skills in pedagogy, new skills in management…and the list continues. Teaching is a dynamic job – no one day is like the next, nor is any day like the last. Teaching is also dynamic for the fact that it demands me to remain – ironically – a lifelong learner.

My career is one in which I lead by learning. I do not remain passive or victim to the challenges of my job – and challenges there are many. I help shape my classroom and therefore my school as a destination of learning for students, colleagues, and myself (Barth, 2001). With my ten years of teaching experience, I have gained a “massive collection of experiences and learning that those who live and work under the roof of the schoolhouse inevitably accrue during their careers” and which Barth (2001) labels as *craft knowledge* (p. 56). As he explains the role of teacher leader he states that such a leader’s “…fundamental criterion [is] to look at how helpful teachers are as members of the school community in providing leadership that will improve the culture of the school and make it hospitable to everyone’s learning” (p. 79). Within my *craft knowledge* I come to understand that there are steps in developing a plan of action as a master lifelong learner and therefore a master lifelong leader.

The idea of teacher leadership is relatively new and unknown according to Marilyn Katzenmeyer and Gayle Moller. In their book Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Helping Teachers Develop as Leaders (2009), Katzenmeyer and Moller explain that there is great confusion about the definitions and expectations of teacher leadership as the term is often tossed around in the arena of popular education jargon. The authors point out that within the profession of education many are reluctant to examine the concept of leadership “because everyone believes he or she knows what it means” (p. 5). In truth, I once thought I knew the meaning of teacher leadership as I held many roles as committee chairs, department chairs, and even obtained the coveted honor of teacher of the year at my previous school. Nevertheless, in my readings and studies of leadership in education over the past few months, I have come to realize that my understanding of teacher leader is actually just within the first stages of formation. I am humbled now to realize that I am only just beginning to come to an understanding of what defines a teacher as leader and what a teacher leader’s role is within the schoolhouse. Where I am confident in saying that teaching is my *calling*, I realize at this very moment that I am just starting to understand that within my call is a need for me to develop as a master teacher leader. My previous leadership experiences were roles I *acted out*. They were roles in which I blindly lead and roles in which I *filled* unknowingly. In hindsight, at the time I accepted each of these various roles of leadership, I was unwilling to admit that I did not have a real sense or understanding of leadership. I assumed that my leadership skills would simply evolve naturally over time. Where I painstakingly reflected upon and improved my teaching over the years through a strategic plan of action, I realize – now – that perhaps major errors within my leadership roles were that I had no similar plan of action or goals in maintaining, developing, and finally evolving my leadership skills as I did my pedagogical skills. Therefore, it is a plan of action in leadership that I will attempt to develop here.

Before beginning a plan of action in leadership, I must first clear up “the great confusion in the definition of teacher leadership” and come to an understanding of where I am currently at in my leadership development in regards to my finalized definition (Katzenmeyer et al., 2009). The authors of Awakening the Sleeping Giant (2009) claim that the first component of teacher leadership is that the teacher leads within the classroom through excellence in teaching (p. 102). I agree. I believe that I have accomplished this aspect of teacher leadership’s definition. This is not to say that I have perfected the classroom instructional experience, but I do feel as though I have obtained a true understanding and identity as a master teacher much more so than as a teacher leader. According to Steven Zemelman and Harry Ross in their book 13 Steps to Teacher Empowerment: Taking a More Active Role in Your School Community (2009), I am a progressive teacher that has become a loan ranger, loved by my students but professionally alone in my school (preface). In fact, it is competence, credibility, and approachableness as a classroom teacher with instructional proficiency that falsely led me to believe I was ready for leadership roles within my last school.

Yet, as Katzenmeyer and Moller have already stated, leading within the classroom in only the first component of defining a teacher leader and the danger of having only classroom competency when entering a leadership role is that many assume you know how to work with other adults, understand change process in schools, and grasp the potential challenges of leadership work. As a result of this assumption, “[unprepared] teacher leaders run into complicated leadership issues that they feel they should know how to handle; when they cannot solve the problems, they blame themselves or others.” The outcome according to Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) is leadership burnout. I am the very “unprepared teacher leader” described here by these authors, and as a result I have had a major burnout and thus retreated from all my leadership opportunities – every single one of them – by leaving the school in which my leadership was expected and starting a new school where I now feel safe once again within the walls of a new classroom and among new unknowing colleagues (Katzenmeyer et. al., 2009, pg. 44-45). Where I meet the criterion of master in the classroom in regards to the first component of teacher leadership, it is clear from my most recent experience of burnout and retreat that I still have much to develop in my understanding of the teacher leader definition and therefore my plan of action.

Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) continue to fine tune the definition of teacher leadership in their book by explaining that teacher leaders take on responsibility for follow through – rarely letting go of desired outcomes, have personal power to influence others, and impact their own learning while impacting the learning of others. In fact the authors explain that it is the key word of “influence” that is found in the heart of teacher leadership. An influential teacher is one that moves beyond the traditional responsibilities of classroom teacher and into one of three roles of leadership: formal reformer, informal non-reformer, or the ideal collaborator. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) explain that the non-reformer (informal leader) is a teacher that may develop a plan to address a pressing need within the school, such as coordinating a mentoring program – peers perceive these leaders as nonthreatening. The reformer (formal leader) is a teacher that moves outside the classroom role and into positions such as instructional resource coaches or professional developers. These are leaders that take on roles to address prominent gaps in student achievement. Finally, the collaborator (the ideal leader) is the teacher that moves in and out of leadership, allowing leadership to shift from teacher to teacher depending on the need and interest required of the school’s environment. The collaborative type of leadership is challenging as Katzenmeyer and Moller explain because it requires a supportive and collaborative school culture. However, it is the collaborating leader that is the most powerful source of change (p. 123-124).

In my completion of Katzenmeyer’s and Moller’s “Assessing Your Readiness for Teacher Leadership” I scored a 26. The authors’ assessment tool states that my score indicates that the majority of my attitudes, values, and beliefs parallel those related to teacher leadership; but that I do still have room to grow within many of the needed leadership skills. Roland S. Barth (2001) lists the “Essential Leadership Qualities of Distinguished Principals” in his book and from this list I have been able to determine both my strengths and areas of needed improvement in regards to leadership skills (p.138-139). My areas of strength are found within my ability to pay attention to the personal. I have consistent vision and try to inspire others to work towards it and I am willing to say “no” when ideas do not support my vision. I am able to juggle many tasks and thoughts at once; I am organized and good at following through on task. I create joy around learning and fit well into the area of public relations. My areas of weakness according to Barth’s list are as follows: I need to learn how to work on being both tactful but direct by working on my one-on-one and group communication skills; I need to empower my spirit of democratic collaboration and stop being a loan ranger, yet at the same time have the courage to stand alone when I think assumptions and traditions should be challenged. As a result of my weakness in these areas I struggle with adversity and need to find ways to resolve professional conflict proficiently.

As I begin to plan my new life as a master teacher leader after graduate school, I realize that I am essentially preparing myself for a *rebirth* in which I will consolidate all my craft knowledge obtained within my schoolhouse and university walls for the purpose of reform (Barth 2001, p.61). For Barth, reformer and leader go hand-in-hand. He explains, “A central part of the work of the school-based reformer is to find ways to honor, reveal, exchange, and celebrate the craft knowledge that resides in every schoolhouse” (p. 62). Modeling active learner is the means to becoming a great leader and thereby creating an atmosphere of intentional analysis of practice and sharing of craft knowledge. Once again, Barth states that reformers and thus leaders “are educators likely to reflect on and to consolidate their craft knowledge, disclose it to others, and put it to work for the purpose of reforming the school, thereby contributing to the formation of a community of lifelong learners” (Barth, 2001, p. 61).

Coming to the realization that I am now to become a teacher leader through reform, I must have a plan of action to guide me through the daunting task of change-maker. Since I am starting a new school this year and since I am at this crucial moment of leadership *rebirth*, my first step in my plan of action will be to learn both the culture of my new school and the vision of my new principal. In my last school and with my last experiences in teacher leadership, I found myself in treacherous waters caught in the middle of administration and peers (Katzenmeyer et al., 2009). Therefore, my plan of action is to help create a working environment that is more along the lines of Katzenmeyer’s and Moller’s ideal teacher collaborator leader. My ultimate goal within the next year is to develop a reputation of assuming varying levels of leadership within my professional learning community, both informal and formal, thus collaborating such roles to meet the immediate needs of the moment, rather than falling into the rut of chairperson within a singly defined role. By allowing flexibility within my leadership label, I hope to avoid the same treacherous waters and promote a much healthier collaborative working environment. In order to work in a healthy collaborative environment I realize that my leadership development plan must also include steps to ensure that I work closely with established formal leaders within my new school, like the principal. Through such relationships I hope to promote a school culture that embraces challenge by facing nondiscussables. As Roland Barth (2001) writes, “And, of course, to change the culture of the school, its residents must name, openly acknowledge the existence of, and address the nondiscussables – especially the nondiscussable that impede learning” (p. 10). Barth (2001) explains the importance of solid teacher and principal relationship:

…the relationship among the adults in the schoolhouse has more impact on the quality and the character of the school – and on the accomplishment of youngsters—than any other factor…Among adult relationships in schools, that between teacher and principal is decisive. I have found no characteristic of a good school more pervasive than healthy teacher-principal relationships – and no characteristic of a troubled school more common than troubled, embattled, or antiseptic administrative teacher relationships. (p. 105)

I am a *new resident* in my most recent school, so too is my principal. Therefore as strangers in a new land, I want to take advantage of our commonality in order to bring forth tough conversations about the school’s label of being broken and an impediment of student learning as determined by test scores. I would like to have a working relationship with my new principal in which I am able to honestly address the vision killers of the school that lurk “like toxic viruses” (Barth, 2001, p. 197). Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) further the point of learning how to overcome obstacles within the building by learning how to work with top leadership to examine the structure of school system leadership in order to shift from old norms of teaching in isolation and I add to this leading in isolation to an environment in which teacher leadership is open and available to any who wish to assume responsibilities.

Once I am able to find a healthy balance among teaching and school leadership and once I understand the predominant values of my new school principal, I must move into the second phase of my plan of action by formulating my learning of leadership potential through inquiry and reflection (Katzenmeyer et al, 2009, pg. 70). I will take time to first complete the “Teacher Leadership School Survey,” Resource B in Awakening the Sleeping Giant. Once I have completed this survey, I will then explore the various options available to me for leadership within the school and use yet another resource in Katzenmeyer’s and Moller’s book table 7.2 “Factors Influencing Success as Teacher Leader” (p. 127). I also want to use my second phase of my action plan to develop networks of other teacher leaders outside the walls of my school. Again Katzenmeyer and Moller offer a suggestion of such networks as in TLN – Teacher Leaders Network – in which teachers refine their policy insights and contribute their voices to the decision that affect the students and communities they serve (p. 157). In other words, I want to develop my *leadership voice* for it is in finding my voice that I believe I will get the opportunity to learn how to state my needs and get them met. If I cannot learn how to effectively speak up, others – others who don’t fully understand how these decisions will affect me, will make decisions. I need a *leadership voice* that echoes advocacy (Zemelman et al., 2009, p. 75).

In my third state of my leadership action plan, which can only occur after I have come to take myself seriously and value my own *leadership craft knowledge* and find my leadership voice (Barth 2001, p. 63), I want to move beyond the walls of education in general and begin to explore the world of journal publication and grant writing. I also want to work on wider projects within the community that address needs I observe within my students, especially in the area of mental health. I think Roland Barth (2001) makes a profound statement when he writes “Many educators lay much of the responsibility of the ills of our schools on the ills of society. But I sometimes wonder if we have a poorly functioning society because we have a dysfunctional school system” (p. 175). In other words, as a member of the community and a master teacher leader, I must take responsibility for the welfare of the community as a whole. And it is within my third stage of my leadership plan of action that I hope to accomplish this ginormous goal.

In closing, Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) write that taking on teacher leadership is enticing, possibly because it satisfies the ego. I believe that my first attempt at teacher leadership within my previous school was for this very reason – my ego. Now that I have the foresight of seeing the error in such egotism, I hope to begin a new leadership career – have a *rebirth* so to speak – by finding a balance between teacher as a lifelong learner and teacher as leader within my new school. I must continue to move forward with my plan of action even at difficult times, but at the same time become wise in my movements within leadership roles, allowing a more fluid path of ebbing and flowing based on actual community and school needs rather than the needs of my ego.

References

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