Getting Started: Leadership Opportunities for Beginning Early Childhood Teachers

Linda J. Armstrong, Katherine C. Kinney, and Lisa H. Clayton

Teacher leadership is quite simply what teachers do for the good of children inside and beyond their classrooms. Teacher leadership is critical today to successfully reform schools and the profession (Lieberman & Miller, 1999; McGhan, 2002; Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1998). Leaders are individuals who focus on their deep commitment to children's learning (Danielson, 2006). They are recognized from their "actions by teachers outside their own classrooms that involve an explicit or implicit responsibility…to support changes" (Miller, Moon, & Elko, 2000, p. 4).

Numerous opportunities for leadership exist. Teacher leaders may be

- dynamic classroom teachers who inspire children and families,
- encouraging coaches for their colleagues,
- age-group or grade-level leaders, and
- active participants in local, state, regional, and national decision-making groups.

Inside the classroom, teacher leaders advocate for best practices and model expert teaching. Teacher leaders contribute to their professional community to improve educational practices locally and more widely. Teacher leadership requires a mixture of influences, positions, time factors, and purposes.

Characteristics of Two Emerging Leaders

The three authors of this article interviewed 12 beginning classroom teachers in an effort to understand how they thought about themselves as leaders while

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teaching young children in a public school district that had recently adopted a new reading series. Data collection and analysis were highly collaborative and interpretive (Erickson, 1986). The authors used three informal research tools:
- an initial survey instrument,
- field notes from classroom visits, and
- audiotaped interviews, transcribed verbatim.

First, the researchers analyzed their findings separately, and then met weekly to collaborate. Together, data was systematically reviewed by focusing on the experiences and beliefs held by the teacher leaders. The findings were compared and contrasted to identify categories and themes (Merriam, 1998). As a result, a range of influences was identified for teachers who are seeking to expand their leadership potential.

This article describes two participants whose experiences illustrate how a school’s organizational structure and norms are central to identifying leadership opportunities. The stories of these two teachers in some ways represent the entire group, but of course there are many individual variations as well.

Meet Elizabeth: Ready to Branch Out

Elizabeth, who had been teaching for 3 years, was a first grade teacher in an elementary school with approximately 650 students and 45 teachers. Her leadership strengths were primarily being exhibited within her classroom, where she cared for her students. Elizabeth indicated she was beginning to extend her leadership influence when she wrote this reflection for a graduate course evaluation:

Your class helped me be a leader in my grade level. I am actually able to present ideas to teachers I work with who have taught 10 years or more. I feel like I provide more input during collaboration meetings, because I am familiar with the research that supports what I am sharing. I have even shared great articles with our school’s reading coach so she can spread the word about an effective strategy. I feel like a much more confident professional because of it.

During the interview process for this study, she smiled brightly as she sat down, but became thoughtful when the first question was posed: “How do you see yourself as a teacher leader in your school right now?”

Without hesitation, she answered, “Mostly in my classroom right now. They [school administrators] assign roles. I was thinking about this.” She indicated that her supervisor was someone who “really tries not to give us any extra work” and “just kind of picks whom she thinks would do the best job.”

Elizabeth described herself as someone who “volunteers for anything I can at school.” She felt the tension between her eagerness to volunteer and continuing to have limited opportunities extended to her. She also saw the limitations of her lack of experience: “Why would somebody put my name down [to work on a committee] since I’ve only been there a couple years?”

Elizabeth’s soft-spoken, unassuming demeanor concealed her strength and resilience, which was revealed when she added, “I may have
to tune people out at lunch, but I try to be as positive as I can.” Elizabeth acknowledged that some faculty had negative attitudes about the new reading series. She saw her role as someone who not only “comes up with solutions and is not negative about situations” but “models that for the kids.”

From Elizabeth’s perspective, she was a newcomer, and as such, rarely able to influence her peers. During the course of the year, she felt that the school was opening up to become a place where she could present her thoughts and embrace change. At the same time, few leadership opportunities were offered.

Elizabeth’s understanding of what it means to be an early childhood teacher leader in this context is replete with tensions, dilemmas, and ambiguities. Elizabeth appeared to have a clear investment in her students and the school. The lack of opportunities to share ideas, concerns, and common experiences affected her ability to lead. After 3 years of teaching, Elizabeth hoped to learn leadership skills from experience. Contrary to her hopes, she was given limited opportunities to step into leadership positions outside her classroom and reflect on those experiences.

Meet Anne: Stepping Up to Leadership Opportunities

Anne is a first grade teacher at an elementary school with about 400 students in grades K-4. There are 35 teachers in her school, five of whom teach first grade. She has taught for 4 years at this school, her only full-time teaching assignment in her career. Anne has a reputation of being a very hard worker. In addition to serving on almost every school committee, she spends many hours after school and on the weekend preparing learning experiences for her classroom. Family and colleagues commended that she needs to “get a life outside of school.” Her commitment to her students, colleagues, and school has consistently led to opportunities to be a teacher leader in her school.

According to Anne, the vast majority of her school’s teachers share responsibility for various events and activities that enhance the learning climate. From organizing author visits, to setting up a family science night, to serving on the Parent Teacher Organization board, teachers share leadership responsibilities. This “makes it simple for the rest of the staff because we are all really busy.”

In addition to helping coordinate school events, Anne, who by nature has a very demure personality, claimed that she leads primarily by example. “I share my ideas with everyone and ask if they need help with anything. Right now with our new reading series I am making PowerPoints®… and I am sharing those with all the first grade teachers, and most of them would not be using PowerPoint otherwise.”

Anne’s scope of influence has expanded from helping teachers in her grade level to facilitating the professional growth of other educators. As part of her professional development plan for the school year, she decided, with the encouragement of her principal, to conduct at least four technology-based professional development sessions for the faculty. She recognized that her school system provides many resources in the area of online tools, and many of her fellow faculty members “don’t have time to explore them and figure out best practices and ways to use them.”

The school’s principal also encouraged Anne to present at the state reading conference and write for a professional journal. Anne noted, “I am really excited about that because that is sort of stretching me in a way I have not gone before…a bigger audience and a larger venue.”

When Anne was asked about her relationship with her principal, she said:

I think she knows now if she asks me to do something, she doesn’t have to beat me to death about details because she knows that I am going to take
Anne noted that her principal faces opposition at times. She said that her principal takes her job very seriously, and she wants what is best for the students. Therefore, if teachers are not doing what is best for students, her principal is not afraid to call them to her office and talk with them. According to Anne, “She doesn’t let them get by and that causes some of them to have some resentment towards her and then in turn to [resent] teacher leaders who are going above and beyond to meet the requirements.”

Anne counts her principal’s influence as a major factor in her teacher-leadership abilities. Anne believes that adults, like children, live up to the expectations that are set for them. According to Anne,

I think her expectations motivate me to do my very best and to make sure that I am doing my job to the best of my abilities.

As far as my leadership role goes, if she asks me to do something I am honored that she asked me to do it and trusts me to do it and I will always try to do my best for that too to make sure that I deserve and earn her respect.

Clearly, Anne is working in a school where the supportive culture greatly influences her opportunities and capacity to lead.

Leadership: Community Culture Matters

The experiences of Elizabeth and Anne demonstrate how an educational setting can influence leadership opportunities for teachers. The school culture is a critical element of the teaching and learning process (Fullan, 2001). The principal is essential for promoting a healthy school culture (Barth, 2002), but healthy schools do not depend entirely on the leadership of one person.

Wise leadership is distributed, and characterizes the whole community (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). In programs where leadership is valued, teachers and administrators bring all that they know to their interactions with others. People construct the social context from their experiences and expectations. Therefore, each person experiences the context differently.

Findings from these interviews indicate that the administrative culture seems to influence the ways teachers and principals work together and how the school accepts beginning teachers into the learning community. Anne appeared to have relatively open access to leadership opportunities and resources, while Elizabeth appeared to have much more restricted access.

What insights can be drawn from considering the influences among biographical and contextual factors on emerging early childhood teacher leaders?

The way teachers interpret their experiences is powerfully influenced by the school context, as well as their prior beliefs about teaching, learning, and leading. It appears that the way Anne’s and Elizabeth’s school communities interacted with them was affected by their knowledge, experiences, and the way they presented themselves. Elizabeth wanted to belong to the school community but resisted conforming to the perceived status quo of negativity. She was at risk for becoming weary from the struggle and overwhelmed by perceived obstacles. Elizabeth seemed to wait until leadership opportunities were presented to her by the principal, while Anne initiated projects that made her more visible as a teacher leader.

An individual’s standing in a community influences access to leadership activities, and therefore affects the sense of community membership (Billett, 1998). Anne’s community appeared to value teacher leadership. She earned social acceptance due to her work ethic and dedication to the profession. This acceptance opened doors for access to leadership roles. Anne was personally invested and functioned as an active participant in the community. Anne’s acceptance led to her becoming a
There are many important insights to be gained from looking closely at how teacher leaders emerge and grow within their learning settings. This informal study highlighted the complexity of challenges for becoming leaders within elementary schools. It is likely that early educators in other settings share similar experiences. Based on these findings, solutions to these challenges are offered for both emerging leaders and their supervisors.

In addition, the authors noticed that successful teacher leaders skillfully foster collaboration with colleagues, supervisors, and the community. They realize that leadership does not happen alone, but actively involves the support of many others. They seek opportunities to work as a team. Because they work to create an atmosphere of trust, they are often sought out for their expertise, especially in the area of technology. By attitude and action, teacher leaders make significant contributions in the success of their schools, their districts, and their communities.

Administrators, Support Emerging Leaders

This study suggests there are three ways that administrators can support emerging leaders: attitude, opportunity, and collaboration. Administrators set a positive climate in the school that encourages teacher leadership. When administrators are positive, teachers feel comfortable trying new ideas in their classrooms and in the school. Administrators who get to know the faculty on a personal level form a bond that enables teachers to work in a risk-free environment.

Effective administrators provide opportunities for teachers to become leaders in the school. Without these opportunities, teachers may not try new ideas. Sometimes providing opportunities means delegating responsibilities to the faculty. This release of control builds trust among everyone in the school and enables change to flourish. As the administrator, new ways can be sought out to improve the school learning community. In order to be a change agent, administrators must be dynamic and engage in professional development about teacher leadership. Staying abreast of current trends
in leadership provides opportunities for both administrators and teachers.

Finally, good administrators collaborate with teachers in their schools. One way is to mentor new teachers who are emerging leaders. This mentor relationship is beneficial to both the teacher and to the administrator. Beginning teachers are looking for avenues to become involved, so mentoring will help them more easily step into leadership roles. By thinking analytically, sharing knowledge, and reflecting on daily challenges, administrators and teacher leaders learn from each other, and benefit the school as a whole.

References
Put These Ideas Into Practice!

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How do teachers become leaders?
- Look for a variety of roles, inside and outside of the classroom.
- Focus on engaging children’s learning by modeling professional practices.
- Share and reflect on classroom experiences with colleagues, supervisors, and children’s families.
- Collaborate with others.
- Volunteer. Invent opportunities to participate.
- Be confident! People look up to capable leaders.
- Share technology expertise. Younger teacher leaders are often influential.
- Become a change agent. Identify professional development opportunities to organize and facilitate.

Teacher leadership opportunities
- dynamic classroom teachers who inspire children and families
- encouraging coaches for colleagues
- age-group or grade-level leaders
- active participants in local, state, regional, and national decision-making groups

How can administrators support emerging teacher leaders?
- Mentor a new teacher or one who is ready to step up to leadership responsibilities. Support matters.
- Stay positive.
- Engage in analytic thinking about roles.
- Let go. Be open to change. Delegate responsibilities.
- Ask for help. Beginning teacher leaders are looking for avenues to become involved.
- Share knowledge. Explain what works and reflect on challenges.
- Search for ways to improve the learning community.
- Continue to engage in professional development. Be a change agent.
- Take an interest in teachers’ personal lives. Find common bonds to build bridges of trust.

Note: Dimensions of Early Childhood readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.