Reframing Teacher Leadership

To Improve Your School

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WHY A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHER LEADERSHIP?

One cannot read Plato's accounts of the dialogues of Socrates and believe that teacher leadership is a 21st century idea. From his first days in the Lyceum to the last drop of hemlock and his journey to the Elysian Fields, teacher and leader were one. Even though 21st century educators are fond of the new—and this book will not disappoint in that respect—contemporary authors are disingenuous if they fail to recognize the shoulders on which they stand. Names we know—Diderot, Kant, and Locke from Europe—and teachers whose identities we infer from archaeological records from Africa, Asia, and South America all testify to the truth that teaching and leadership are inseparable qualities. In the 21st century, influential scholars have advocated distributed leadership (Elmore, 2000), implying that hierarchy is less effective than networks (Reeves, 2006b). Whether the perspective is from ancient times, the Renaissance, the previous century, or tomorrow, teachers and school leaders continue to focus on an essential question: how can we transcend the boundaries among teachers, leaders, and political authorities in a way that allows us to nurture, challenge, encourage, and develop every student entrusted to our care? I will attempt to address that question in the following pages.

If teacher leadership is not a new concept, why am I proposing a new framework for teacher leadership? The straightforward, if immodest, response is that although the existing teacher leadership literature contains many compelling anecdotes and rhetorical flourishes, it is strikingly unburdened by evidence and systematic research. In the course of more than 2 million miles of travel to schools around the globe, I have learned at the very least that teachers and school leaders demand practical

information and applicable research. The framework is based on a study of students, teachers, and school leaders from demographically, economically, and linguistically diverse areas. This study, supported by the Public Education Foundation of Clark County and the Clark County School District Office of Research and Accountability, included 81 schools in Clark County, Nevada, the United States' fourth-largest school system, with a student population of more than 330,000 pupils. Clark County is an ideal research environment because it includes urban, suburban, and rural schools with a wide range of student characteristics. Teams of teachers and school leaders from throughout the county applied for participation in the research project (see Appendix B for the research proposal form and Appendix C for the rubric used to evaluate the applications). Eighty-two applications were accepted, and 81 research teams completed the project. Research began in the fall of 2006 and was completed in the spring of 2007. Participating teams represent all grade levels, from prekindergarten through high school, and a wide range of subjects. Appendix A includes the abstracts for all of the projects.

Although many research conclusions are equivocal, the results of this study are clear and striking. Teachers not only exert significant influence on the performance of students, but they also influence the performance of other teachers and school leaders. Overall, the educators in this study reported that they were more likely to be influenced by the professional practices and action research of their peers than they were to be influenced by journal articles or undergraduate or graduate courses. With the response range including 1 (not influential); 2 (rarely influential); 3 (somewhat influential); and 4 (very influential), the average ratings were as follows: undergraduate courses, 1.8; professional reading, 2.3; graduate courses, 2.6; and advice from a colleague, 3.6.

When offered the opportunity to list all of the influences on their professional practices, these teachers emphasized other teachers, students, family, and personal experience over many other presumed influences on their practice. Figure 1.1 shows the percentage of total responses each source of influence received from participants.

Figure 1.1
Sources of Influence on Practice Indicated by Open Response
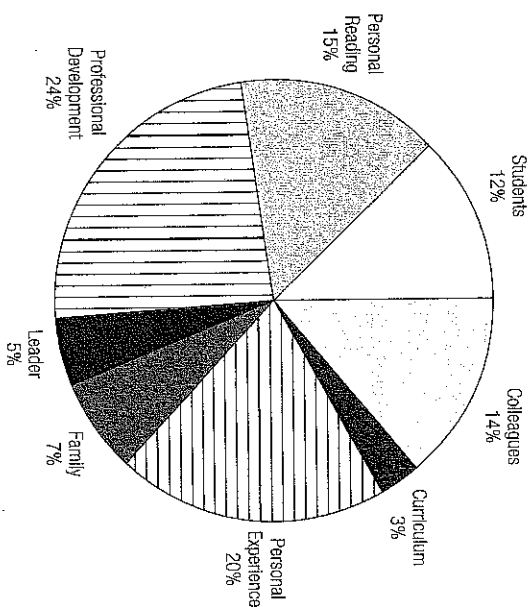
Respondents were allowed to list up to four influences on their professional practices. In this case, there were 86 respondents and thus a possible total of 344 sources of influence on professional practice. Each slice represents the percentage of the total possible responses.

The most important finding of the study—and the foundation of my New Framework for Teacher Leadership—is that direct observation of the professional practices of teachers by teachers must become the new foundation of professional development. This finding turns on its head much of the change-theory literature that presumes that system change is a top-down affair, dominated by a charismatic chief executive with an inspiring vision who, with a combination of persuasion and brute force, creates the buy-in necessary for systemic change, or at least the appearance of change until the expiration of the charismatic leader's contract. Although the evidence does not render professional development seminars irrelevant, it does place them within a broader perspective. Leaders

at every level should compare their professional development calendar and budget to the relative impact of alternative sources of influence on teacher practice. The combined influence of professional development, leadership, and curriculum accounts for about one-third of the sources of influence identified by teachers on their practice.

Guskey (2000) and Sparks and Hirsch (1997) have long warned of the limitations of traditional professional development, and they have wisely counseled schools to make greater use of job-embedded professional development and to evaluate results based on the observable impact on professional practices and student results. The New Framework for Teacher Leadership takes this thoughtful advice to the next step by making action research by teachers and school leaders the heart of professional learning. Although some readers may regard this approach as little more than common sense, we must contrast common sense with common practice. In many school systems, professional development strategies continue to rely on a combination of outside experts' inspirational speeches and administrators' stern follow-up memos. Too rarely are educators asking the most fundamental question in education research: is it working?

From the standpoint of a professional developer, a person who spends a good deal of his life attempting to improve student achievement by improving the knowledge and skills of educators and leaders, it is some consolation that about 40 percent of the influence on teachers and leaders may be associated with the professional development seminars, books, and articles to which I have devoted my professional life. What about the other 60 percent? Let the data speak. Teachers and leaders are influenced by their own colleagues, their own experiences, their own students, and their familial associations. It is a conceit beyond words for educational leaders to say that training is equivalent to influencing professional practices.

The participants in this study are at the same time exceptional and ordinary. They are exceptional because they represent the best our profession has to offer—diligent, caring, and dedicated. But are their

characteristics so different from those of teachers in school systems around the world? If this particular sample is truly exceptional, then the results of this research are unlikely to be replicated. If, on the other hand, we have a group of excellent educators who, in fact, are not out of the ordinary, then the results of the study are far more meaningful.

Appendix A contains a list of participant names, their research questions, and abstracts of their findings. The teacher researchers in this study had an average of 13.7 years in the profession and 8.7 years with their current school systems. Of the educators participating, 68 percent had a master's degree, 16 percent held a bachelor's degree, 10 percent held a doctorate, and 6 percent had a specialist's degree. In terms of participants' job roles, 68 percent were classroom teachers, 16 percent were administrators, and the remaining participants had other duties, including coaching and counseling. Considering the composition of this sample, the research results are strongly biased in favor of working classroom professionals. These findings are not based on researchers who, on the side, do a little bit of teaching. Rather, the research in the following pages is based on teachers who, on top of their already busy schedules, have decided to engage in research.

The research questions considered include a wide spectrum of topics at the forefront of educators' and leaders' concerns. Studying students from prekindergarten through high school, research teams investigated questions about reading, writing, science, math, music, social studies, health, and physical education. The student populations included special education, English language learners, and economically disadvantaged students, as well as regular education, English-speaking students, and economically advantaged students. Schools from urban, suburban, and rural areas participated in the study. In addition to considering explicit academic subjects, researchers considered critical thinking, analysis, student engagement, attitudes, beliefs, and parent involvement. Several studies specifically addressed student behavior, and many other studies included observations about improvements in student behavior that occurred coincidentally with improvements in academic achievement.

Demographic Characteristics and Student Achievement: The Role of Leadership Attitudes

Student demographic characteristics clearly have an impact on student achievement (Rothstein, 2004a, 2004b). Every day, however, teachers must grapple with the weight their demographic characteristics have compared with the weight their professional practices have. Few people would deny that housing, health care, nutrition, and home environment profoundly influence students' educational opportunities, but the central question is whether those influences render teacher professional practices impotent. The perceptions of teachers in this study suggest that teacher practice is not only important but also significantly greater in influencing student achievement than student demographic characteristics. Teachers were asked to respond to the following prompt: "If I were giving advice to a new superintendent or central office leader, the most important thing I would say is. . . ." The response range included 1 (strongly disagree); 2 (disagree); 3 (no opinion); 4 (agree); and 5 (strongly agree). The average ratings were as follows: student demographics, 3.21; leadership practices, 3.33; and teaching practices, 4.21. Note that teachers made these responses after conducting their own action research.

Are these perceptions simply the delusional views of a few Pollyannas? That is the stereotype cast by those who resolutely believe that teachers are, in essence, potted plants decorating a school with good intentions while demographic destiny marches onward. Given the extensive professional experience—an average of almost 14 years—and education of this sample, such a stereotype is hardly persuasive. But at the end of the day, it is evidence, not perception, that must carry the argument. In a study of the same 330 schools from which the current teacher research sample was drawn, the Leadership and Learning Center examined the extent to which school leadership teams attributed the causes of student achievement to student demographic characteristics or to teachers, and compared those perceptions with measurements of student achievement in reading, writing, math, science, and social studies

on a variety of assessments. Specifically, the following assessments were considered: the Criterion-Referenced Test, the High School Proficiency Examination, the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, the Iowa Tests of Educational Development, and the Nevada Analytic Writing Examination. Those results, originally reported in *The Learning Leader* (Reeves, 2006a), indicate that in schools where leadership teams primarily attributed student achievement to student demographic variables, an average of 43.6 percent of students scored proficient or higher on a group of 25 assessments. In contrast, in schools where leadership teams primarily attributed student achievement to faculty variables, an average of 64.8 percent of students scored proficient or higher on those assessments.

The findings are eerily reminiscent of the Pygmalion effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968, 2003), noted more than four decades ago when researchers found that teacher perceptions of student ability are self-fulfilling prophecies. In George Bernard Shaw's 1916 play *Pygmalion*, phonetics professor Henry Higgins transforms Cockney flower vendor Eliza Doolittle into an English lady with perfect diction. The Broadway musical *My Fair Lady* made the whole affair into lighthearted comedy. Shaw's more serious message was that perceptions become reality, for good or ill. As Eliza says in Act V,

You see, really and truly, apart from the things anyone can pick up (the dressing and the proper way of speaking, and so on), the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated.

The education research discussed here suggests that the Eliza Doolittles of the study are not only our students, but also ourselves. When we expect that we have an impact on student achievement, we are right. When we expect that we are impotent, we are also right.

Skeptics may argue that the evidence in this study is not conclusive because the relationship between educators' attitudes and student achievement could have occurred *because* the schools were high-achieving in the first place. In other words, the leadership teams who

believed that they made a positive difference could have simply been lucky enough to have high-achieving students, and those who believed that demographics were more influential could have begun with low-achieving students. It is easy enough to test this hypothesis by evaluating the perceptions of leadership teams not with the student achievement scores, but with gains in student achievement. The results are even more striking when analyzing gains in achievement. In schools where leadership teams primarily attributed student achievement to student variables, the average gain between 2005 and 2006 scores on the 25 assessments was 6.14 percent. Yet in schools where leadership teams primarily attributed student achievement to faculty variables, the average gain was 18.4 percent. Whether starting with high- or low-achieving students, the team's perception acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy. When school leaders perceive that teachers are the predominant influence on student achievement, students and teachers alike rise to those expectations.

In sum, when teachers are given the opportunity to engage in action research on a sustained basis in a collaborative environment, three things happen:

- Teacher researchers frequently (although not always) have a direct and measurable impact on student achievement, behavior, and educational equity as a result of specific practices during their research.

- Whether or not the teachers' hypotheses are supported by their research, teacher researchers affect the professional practices of their colleagues.

- Participation in action research and the observation of and reflection on research results can lead to what Collins (2001) calls the *flywheel effect*. Effective professional practices are reinforced and repeated not only by the original teacher researchers but also by many other teachers who are influenced by these observations and practices.

From Research to the New Framework

This brings us to *Reframing Teacher Leadership to Improve Your School*, a contribution to the literature that is based on research rather than on speculation, personal preference, or philosophy. In my work around the world, I have yet to hear a teacher inquire about my uninformed opinion or idiosyncratic personal preference. Rather, teachers inquire about research, evidence, and experience. Therefore, this study is not the only one that offers insight to practitioners and policymakers. Rather, the greatest value from this initial research project is a framework in which teacher researchers will ask important questions, conduct investigations, discern inferences, and share their wisdom with colleagues.

In their seminal work *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything*, Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams (2006) invited readers to complete their text, transforming it from a stagnant document into a living work. Because an integral part of the new framework is the creation of a sustained network for professional excellence, the dialogue in this book will continue at the commercial-free Web site www.teacher-leadership.info. There readers can find a continuing series consisting of teacher research, commentary, questions, and insights from teacher researchers around the world. In addition, readers are invited to contribute their own findings, successes, challenges, disappointments, and triumphs. Therefore, even if you choose not to finish this book, your opportunity to participate is as close and fast as your nearest Internet connection.

Before you abandon the printed page for the Web, however, please allow me to make a case for the rest of the book. In the following pages, you will learn not only about cutting-edge research findings, but also about practical applications that can help improve student achievement and educational equity. You can learn how to have more influence as an educator and school leader. You can learn—not just from me, but from your colleagues—how to achieve more fun, greater satisfaction, and better results in every class.

• **Recognize excellence.** Check out your trophy case. How much space is devoted to academic excellence by teachers, students, instructional coaches, paraprofessionals, parents, and others who directly contribute to the achievement of your goals? Do not be surprised at the strong relationship between what each school does well and what it chooses to recognize. One of the least expensive initiatives any school leader can make is to build a few more trophy cases. That, more than anything else, reflects the culture of your schools.

• **Emphasize freedom to use judgment.** Leaders are not micromanagers of the moment, but they are architects of boundaries (Reeves, 2006a). Create a trust index in which you list all the ways—and there are many—in which teachers have the discretion to use their judgment, discretion, and authority. That extensive list stands in stark contrast to the small number of areas in which the senior leadership exerts authority. There are hundreds of ways to teach literature, composition, and geometry, but one cannot choose to avoid teaching literature, composition, and geometry.

• **Listen to and act on teacher ideas.** Would you like to increase your credibility as a leader by many orders of magnitude today? Then take just one idea from a classroom teacher, implement it, give the teacher credit, and watch organizational transformation happen.

• **Encourage innovation.** Many senior leaders are masters of innovation. That's great, and that's a potential limitation. Because when a senior leader is innovative and thoughtful, the impact on the innovative colleagues may be diminished. If you want to encourage teacher leadership, encourage innovation and get out of the way. Consider the advice of Dorothy Leonard and Walter Swap (2005) and create processes that proceed from divergence to convergence.

• **Provide feedback and coaching.** Why did most teachers and administrators enter into the profession of education? Because they were excellent students, good at school, enjoyed school, saw the value in school, in fact *loved* school. Now, however, the same teachers and administrators face students every day who do not share their perspective. They

deal with students who find school boring, distasteful, and irrelevant. Some of their students actively hate school. But those disengaged and angry students love something—gang affiliation, social relationships, or brief acknowledgment on the elementary playground or in the high school hallway. When do we provide feedback and coaching? For students, the interval might be every six to nine weeks. For teachers, it might be every one to three years. For administrators, it might be at the end of the year, or it might be at the end of a contract, or it might be never (Reeves, 2004c). If we wish to maximize the power and influence of feedback, then we must provide feedback more frequently at every level—students, teachers, and leaders.

• **Value people as individuals.** This is perhaps the greatest challenge in transforming respect from a song title to a daily reality. It demands that we recognize, as I recently told a colleague who wanted to quit, that "life is short, but relationships are long." Although leaders may see test scores, yearly progress, and interim results as important—and indeed they are—our colleagues may have other priorities, including the birth of a child, the anniversary of a marriage, or the death of a loved one. The power of teacher leadership is seldom more in evidence than when teaching colleagues are more cognizant of these important family events than are senior leaders. One of the bridges that every parent must cross is the acknowledgment that our children have interests that extend beyond our home; wise leaders recognize that colleagues have vital interests and relationships outside of work.

• **Provide a sense of being included.** Putnam (2000) helps us to understand the power of inclusion, and Goleman (2006) suggests that humans and other primates are hardwired for social connection. I have attempted to foster that connection with the Web site www.WikiTeacherLeadership.com and would like to suggest that all system leaders take advantage of this site or create one of their own. What is the worst that could happen? People will say something critical about senior leadership. This is true, and it will be true whether or not you embrace the new framework. Therefore, create multiple initiatives