

The Counter-Intuitive Benefits of Teacher Leadership: Staying Sane and Sustained

Why should beginning teachers engage in leadership? Teaching is extremely demanding in terms of time, intellect, and social-emotional resources. Why add leadership to the endless list of responsibilities? I don't ask these questions hypothetically. I asked them myself in my first few years of teaching. Effecting change outside of my classroom was low on my list of priorities. I recall thinking, "I need to focus on being the best teacher I can be for my students . . . and survive my 3rd period class. The leadership can wait." There were two flaws in my thinking. One was the notion that teacher leadership necessarily means taking on a formal role such as a department head or instructional coach. KSTF Senior Fellow **Heather Buskirk** said it best: leadership includes "teaching with your door open, or inviting someone else to see it, or even having conversations about it" (**Inverness Research Associates**, 2014, p. 7). (Heather makes a similar point in a **recent blog post** she wrote with KSTF Executive Director and CEO Nicole Gillespie). The second flaw was the assumption that the time and stress of teacher leadership outweighed the benefits to my well-being. On the contrary, when I acted as a leading teacher, I felt more sane and sustained. It is this perhaps counter-intuitive aspect of the benefits of teacher leadership that I focus on in this blog post.¹

Like many teachers in their first and second years, I sometimes struggled to make it through the day. I was more often exhausted than not. I loved teaching, but I was on the brink of early-career burnout. Then, before my 3rd year of teaching, an administrator asked me if I would facilitate the 9th grade professional learning community (PLC). I was surprised and honored that she asked me to fulfill this role, and I accepted.

At the beginning of the school year, teachers in the PLC vented about their classroom management challenges. When we sent unruly students to administrators, it rarely worked. Students were sometimes returned immediately to our classrooms where they often picked up where they left off. Alternatively, they were suspended, which meant they were missing out on learning. Neither of these options sat well with us, so we decided to take matters into our own hands. We developed a system where we sent students to each other's classrooms when we were not able to effectively redirect their behaviors. Students wrote expansive reflections in the "third party" colleagues' classrooms. These reflections included

what happened, why, and how they could have acted more appropriately. Typically, these reflections led to conversations between the “third party” and the students. We also gained a better understanding the students and the situations that led to the “misbehavior.” I recall an African-American student reflecting that I reprimanded his use of profanity less than other students. Since he described the situation to one of my colleagues, I had someone to help me identify the “next step.” In this case, the next step was meeting with the student and his mom to learn more about his experience in my class. The behavioral management system became more than what we had intended. What began as a stop-gap measure became a way to gather information about students’ experiences in our classes and reflect on the data with colleagues. My colleagues and I felt a sense of agency. Rather than depending on the administration, we were able to manage the challenges ourselves. We also learned about students’ experiences in our classrooms, which led us to be more mindful of our biases and to better meet students’ needs.

The feeling that leadership can increase sense of agency is corroborated by research. In a recent review article, Wenner and Campbell (2016) provide the following summary of the benefits of leadership to teachers themselves: “By and large, teacher leaders were reported to feel more confident, empowered, and professionally satisfied via their work as a teacher leader” (p. 18). These findings mirror the experiences of other KSTF Fellows. Senior Fellow **Mandi Kraemer** explains, “[Facilitating a PLC] was my gateway to leadership in a formal sense at my school... It wasn’t a super hands-on role, but it definitely built some confidence in me because I was in that group with some teachers with obviously more experience than me. And they were really receptive to me as a facilitator” (**Trygstad & Banilower**, 2015, p. 15). As for satisfaction, before engaging in leadership, I sometimes had a myopic focus on my own students, which led to professional isolation. With leadership came a greater sense of belonging to a team. Research has found that belonging is central to health and happiness (Walton & Cohen, 2007), which was certainly the case for me. I began school days in a better mood as a teacher leader compared to when I had a myopic focus on my own classroom. The support of my colleagues also lowered my stress since I could turn to them when I had challenges in my classroom. By engaging in teacher leadership, I believe that I made some positive impacts beyond my own classroom. For example, my colleagues and I analyzed and discussed student work more frequently over time. This process led to exchanges

about how to adapt curriculum and instruction to support student learning. Leadership also benefitted me, personally, by decreasing my stress and increasing my job satisfaction, confidence, and sense of agency.

The first years of teaching are tough to say the least. Prior to engaging in teacher leadership, it might seem like an unnecessary drain on a low tank of energy. However, initiating and facilitating change beyond one's own classroom can provide the fuel that sustains early-career teachers. KSTF believes teachers have the expertise to drive the changes we need in our educational system. We also want teachers to engage in leadership because we care about them. We care about their well-being and job satisfaction. We want them to claim their agency and feel sustained. Teacher leadership changes collegial relationships, cultures of schools and departments, and potentially, our educational system. It also benefits the leading teachers themselves.

¹I want to acknowledge that I am not currently teaching. After five years of teaching, I was eager to improve education by advancing knowledge of teaching and learning in a different way: by researching science education as a PhD student. I conceptualize my research and scholarship as a form of teacher leadership. However, teacher leadership does not require leaving the classroom, something I learned early on as a teacher.

References

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