

Ten Roles for Teacher Leaders by Cindy Harrison and Joellen Killion

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The ways teachers can lead are as varied as teachers themselves. Teacher leaders assume a wide range of roles to support school and student success. Whether these roles are assigned formally or shared informally, they build the entire school's capacity to improve. Because teachers can lead in a variety of ways, many teachers can serve as leaders among their peers. So what are some of the leadership options available to teachers?

The following 10 roles are a sampling of the many ways teachers can contribute to their schools' success.

1. Resource Provider

Teachers help their colleagues by sharing instructional resources. These might include Web sites, instructional materials, readings, or other resources to use with students. They might also share such professional resources as articles, books, lesson or unit plans, and assessment tools.

Tinisha becomes a resource provider when she offers to help Carissa, a new staff member in her second career, set up her classroom. Tinisha gives Carissa extra copies of a number line for her students to use, signs to post on the wall that explain to students how to get help when the teacher is busy, and the grade-level language arts pacing guide.

2. Instructional Specialist

An instructional specialist helps colleagues implement effective teaching strategies. This help might include ideas for differentiating instruction or planning lessons in partnership with fellow teachers. Instructional specialists might study research-based classroom strategies (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001); explore which instructional methodologies are appropriate for the school; and share findings with colleagues.

When his fellow science teachers share their frustration with students' poorly written lab reports, Jamal suggests that they invite several English teachers to recommend strategies for writing instruction. With two English teachers serving as instructional specialists, the science teachers examine a number of lab reports together and identify strengths and weaknesses. The English teachers share strategies they use in their classes to improve students' writing.

3. Curriculum Specialist

Understanding content standards, how various components of the curriculum link together, and how to use the curriculum in planning instruction and assessment is essential to ensuring consistent curriculum implementation throughout a school. Curriculum specialists lead teachers to agree on standards, follow the adopted curriculum, use common pacing charts, and develop shared assessments.

Tracy, the world studies team leader, works with the five language arts and five social studies teachers in her school. Using standards in English and social studies as their guides, the team members agree to increase the consistency in their classroom curriculums and administer common assessments. Tracy suggests that the team develop a common understanding of the standards and agrees to facilitate the development and analysis of common quarterly assessments.

4. Classroom Supporter

Classroom supporters work inside classrooms to help teachers implement new ideas, often by demonstrating a lesson, coteaching, or observing and giving feedback. Blase and Blase (2006) found that consultation with peers enhanced teachers' self-efficacy (teachers' belief in their own abilities and capacity to successfully solve teaching and learning problems) as they reflected on practice and grew together, and it also encouraged a bias for action (improvement through collaboration) on the part of teachers. (p. 22)

Marcia asks Yolanda for classroom support in implementing nonlinguistic representation strategies, such as graphic organizers, manipulatives, and kinesthetic activities (Marzano et al., 2001). Yolanda agrees to plan and teach a lesson with Marcia that integrates several relevant strategies. They ask the principal for two half-days of professional release time, one for learning more about the strategy and planning a lesson together, and the other for coteaching the lesson to Marcia's students and discussing it afterward.

5. Learning Facilitator

Facilitating professional learning opportunities among staff members is another role for teacher leaders. When teachers learn with and from one another, they can focus on what most directly improves student learning. Their professional learning becomes more relevant, focused on teachers' classroom work, and aligned to fill gaps in student learning. Such communities of learning can break the norms of isolation present in many schools.

Frank facilitates the school's professional development committee and serves as the committee's language arts representative. Together, teachers plan the year's professional development program using a backmapping model (Killion, 2001). This model begins with identifying student learning needs, teachers' current level of knowledge and skills in the target areas, and types of learning opportunities that different groups of teachers need. The committee can then develop and implement a professional development plan on the basis of their findings.

6. Mentor

Serving as a mentor for novice teachers is a common role for teacher leaders. Mentors serve as role models; acclimate new teachers to a new school; and advise new teachers about instruction, curriculum, procedure, practices, and politics. Being a mentor takes a great deal of time and expertise and makes a significant contribution to the development of a new professional.

Ming is a successful teacher in her own 1st grade classroom, but she has not assumed a leadership role in the school. The principal asks her to mentor her new teammate, a brand-new teacher and a recent immigrant from the Philippines. Ming prepares by participating in the district's three-day training on mentoring. Her role as a mentor will not only include helping her teammate negotiate the district, school, and classroom, but will also include acclimating her colleague to the community. Ming feels proud as she watches her teammate develop into an accomplished teacher.

7. School Leader

Being a school leader means serving on a committee, such as a school improvement team; acting as a grade-level or department chair; supporting school initiatives; or representing the school on community or district task forces or committees. A school leader shares the vision of the school, aligns his or her professional goals with those of the school and district, and shares responsibility for the success of the school as a whole.

Joshua, staff sponsor of the student council, offers to help the principal engage students in the school improvement planning process. The school improvement team plans to revise its nearly 10-year-old vision and wants to ensure that students' voices are included in the process. Joshua arranges a daylong meeting for 10 staff members and 10 students who represent various views of the school experience, from nonattenders to grade-level presidents. Joshua works with the school improvement team facilitator to ensure that the activities planned for the meeting are appropriate for students so that students will actively participate.

8. Data Coach

Although teachers have access to a great deal of data, they do not often use that data to drive classroom instruction. Teacher leaders can lead conversations that engage their peers in analyzing and using this information to strengthen instruction.

Carol, the 10th grade language arts team leader, facilitates a team of her colleagues as they look at the results of the most recent writing sample, a teacher-designed assessment given to all incoming 10th grade students. Carol guides teachers as they discuss strengths and weaknesses of students' writing performance as a group, as individuals, by classrooms, and in disaggregated clusters by race, gender, and previous school. They then plan instruction on the basis of this data.

9. Catalyst for Change

Teacher leaders can also be catalysts for change, visionaries who are “never content with the status quo but rather always looking for a better way” (Larner, 2004, p. 32). Teachers who take on the catalyst role feel secure in their own work and have a strong commitment to continual improvement. They pose questions to generate analysis of student learning.

In a faculty meeting, Larry expresses a concern that teachers may be treating some students differently from others. Students who come to him for extra assistance have shared their perspectives, and Larry wants teachers to know what students are saying. As his colleagues discuss reasons for low student achievement, Larry challenges them to explore data about the relationship between race and discipline referrals in the school. When teachers begin to point fingers at students, he encourages them to examine how they can change their instructional practices to improve student engagement and achievement.

10. Learner

Among the most important roles teacher leaders assume is that of learner. Learners model continual improvement, demonstrate lifelong learning, and use what they learn to help all students achieve.

Manuela, the school's new bilingual teacher, is a voracious learner. At every team or faculty meeting, she identifies something new that she is trying in her classroom. Her willingness to explore new strategies is infectious. Other teachers, encouraged by her willingness to discuss what works and what doesn't, begin to talk about their teaching and how it influences student learning. Faculty and team meetings become a forum in which teachers learn from one another. Manuela's commitment to and willingness to talk about learning break down barriers of isolation that existed among teachers.

Roles for All

Teachers exhibit leadership in multiple, sometimes overlapping, ways. Some leadership roles are formal with designated responsibilities. Other more informal roles emerge as teachers interact with their peers. The variety of roles ensures that teachers can find ways to lead that fit their talents and interests. Regardless of the roles they assume, teacher leaders shape the culture of their schools, improve student learning, and influence practice among their peers.

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