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## Daring Greatly: School-University Partnerships and the Development of Teacher Leadership

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# Daring Greatly: School-University Partnerships and the Development of Teacher Leadership

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## **Daring Greatly: School-University Partnerships and the Development of Teacher Leadership**

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**Abstract:** This survey-based self-study explored how teachers' commitments to a formalized lead teacher role in relationship with a university partnership impacted their perceptions of themselves as educational leaders and as agents of change; and how these perceptions impacted P-12 student learning. The study showcases the importance of creating an infrastructure that includes a lead teacher component when establishing professional development school (PDS)-university partnerships and demonstrates the value and impact that teacher leaders bring to partnership work. Through this study, the authors hope to further professionalize and exonerate the role of lead teacher in order to encourage others to "dare greatly" by building on this effective model.

**KEYWORDS:** *professional development schools (PDS), teacher leadership, partnership infrastructure, simultaneous renewal, lead teachers*

### **NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:**

2. A school–university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community
7. A structure that allows all participants a forum for ongoing governance, reflection, and collaborate
8. Work by college/university faculty and P–12 faculty in formal roles across institutional settings

*It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.*

~ Theodore Roosevelt

Teacher leaders are in the arena that Teddy Roosevelt described when giving the *Citizenship in a Republic* speech at the Sorbonne in Paris, France in 1910. His message included that a democracy needs leaders of the highest caliber in order to hold the average citizen to a high standard. He called for leaders to engage in high integrity action and cautioned that words alone are not enough. Today's socio-political climate has created a need for teacher leaders to be in the arena as strong, moral, and engaged citizens more than ever before.

Many definitions can be found in the literature of what constitutes a lead teacher or teacher leader (York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Wenner and Campbell, in their comprehensive review of teacher leader research from 2004 to 2013, defined teacher leaders as "teachers who maintain K-12 classroom-based teaching responsibilities, while also taking on leadership responsibilities outside of the classroom" (p. 141). They go on to "acknowledge that this definition of teacher leadership does not represent a consensus conception but is one that helps differentiate teacher leaders from other forms of leadership in schools (e.g., administrators, disciplinary specialists)" (p. 141).

For decades, professional development schools (PDSs) have been discussed as a place for teacher leadership to be recognized and cultivated. Darling-Hammond, Bullmaster and Cobb (1995) described how leadership in schools "looks very different from traditional bureaucratic, hierarchical conceptions that slot individuals into different, limited functions and that place them in superordinate and subordinate relation to one another" (p. 93). Hunzicker's (2018) more current interpretation of teacher leadership in professional development schools, describes it as "a strategic, process-oriented stance motivated by deep concern for students and activated through formal, informal, and hybrid leadership roles that span the boundaries of school, university, and community" (p. 24). This definition illustrates the complexity of the multi-faceted roles a teacher leader plays as well as the dynamic nature of the conditions where those roles exist. Still, at the heart of a teacher leadership role is what Sergiovanni (1987) calls "cultural leadership;" the "power to accomplish" as opposed to "power over people or events."

In January of 2018, the Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) published "A Pivot Towards Clinical Practice, Its Lexicon, and the Renewal of Teacher Education," which was the culmination of years of work from experts in the field engaged in clinical practice. The document outlines ten proclamations to further operationalize the recommendations of the 2010 NCATE Blue Ribbon Panel report. Many of the proclamations encompass the concept of teacher leadership, but the Expertise Proclamation describes its essence best:

Teaching is a profession requiring specialized knowledge and preparation. Educators are the pedagogical and content experts. It is through the assertion and application of this expertise that they can inform the process and vision for renewing educator preparation. While external stakeholders play a role in the development of policies and regulations that affect educator preparation and licensure, educators themselves must take the lead to guide, shape, and define the parameters and renewal of their profession (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2018, p. 42).

Teacher leaders play essential roles in the renewal of schools, in preparing future teachers, and in supporting in-service teachers; and are often the next generation of school administrators. Studying how to identify, support, and retain this talent is imperative to the health of all schools, but especially those serving in PDSs with the charge of preparing new teachers for the profession.

This survey-based self-study explored how teachers' commitments to a formalized lead teacher role in relationship with a university partnership impacted their perceptions of themselves as educational leaders and as agents of change; and how these perceptions impacted P-12 student learning.

### **Description of the School-University Partnership**

The University of Connecticut (UConn) Neag School of Education Professional Development School mission is predicated on the concept of simultaneous renewal and participation of all stakeholders. It is important to note the distinction between the *reform* of schools, a process where the emphasis is on fixing something perceived as broken, and *renewal*, a commitment to revisiting a system, partnership, or school many times and responding to the needs or changes of a dynamic, reciprocal relationship. Characterizing the difference between reform and renewal, Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, and Goodlad (2004) explained, "Whereas school reform attempts to include in daily educational fare something that presumably was not there before, school renewal creates an environment – a whole culture – that routinely conducts diagnoses to determine what is going well and what is not" (pp. 156-157). At the center of UConn's partnership network is the commitment to simultaneous renewal.

UConn's PDS network as spanned 30 years and consists of 40 schools across nine school districts with clinical faculty who hold terminal degrees overseeing the settings. The long history of partnering has allowed time for reciprocal, trusting, professional relationships to develop among school and university-based educators (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996).

The purposes of this study are to showcase the importance of creating an infrastructure that includes a lead teacher component when establishing PDS-university partnerships and to demonstrate the value and impact that teacher leaders bring to partnership work. Additionally, we hope to further professionalize and exonerate the role of lead teacher in order to encourage others to "dare greatly" by building on this effective model.

### **Formalizing the Lead Teacher Role in PDS**

Teacher leadership capacity and potential has significant implications for school renewal, particularly in response to a national concern for educational improvement and accountability with regard to meeting the needs of all learners (Danielson, 2007; Mayrowetz, 2008; Muijs & Harris, 2007; Phelps, 2008; Scribner et al., 2007; Vernon-Dotson & Floyd, 2012). University and public school partnerships foster collaboration that attempts to break down traditional institutional walls so that research and practice can merge in a way that is life-giving for school and university-based educators, P-12 students, and preservice teachers enrolled in teacher preparation programs.

In 2010, University of Connecticut's Schools as Clinics Committee (SaCC) was initiated and co-chaired by the Director of School-University Partnerships and the Associate Director of Teacher Education. The committee's purpose is to provide PDS stakeholders with a forum for identifying and discussing pertinent partnership issues, recommending policy, processing candidate performance issues and dialoguing about the continued improvement of the teacher

education program. Also discussed were ways to promote simultaneous renewal, which is the ultimate goal of maintaining professional development schools.

In 2013, the Schools as Clinics Committee created a formalized Lead teacher role in an effort to professionalize and empower the role of school-based educators. This position ensures that communication between the university and the school is effective and ongoing. In addition to the goal of strengthening the communication loop, the role assists in improving the quality of clinic and student teaching experiences for teacher candidates. The coalescing of this group of professional educators has resulted in deeper, stronger, and more authentic relationships between the lead teachers and university-based teacher educators.

The lead teachers attend several meetings a year on campus with the intent of soliciting feedback from practitioners in university teacher preparation program revisions as well as promoting the sharing of current, best educational practices. This dynamic group has discussed topics such as effective qualities and dispositions of cooperating teachers, gaps and strengths of the teacher preparation program, and high leverage teaching practices. They have reviewed and provided feedback on the evaluations used to measure the quality and impact of field placements as well as on observational protocols generated to focus on teacher candidate strengths and areas for growth. Lead teachers helped create a tool to measure and assess university supervisor efficacy and have identified quality indicators of effective internship experiences for graduate students. The work and initiatives the lead teachers have engaged in have greatly improved the overall effectiveness of UConn's teacher preparation program.

Lead teachers hold a ten-month, annually appointed position in one of UConn's 40 partnership schools. They are nominated at the building level, using a process designed and/or endorsed by the district-level pre-service placement coordinator, and selected by their building administrator based on their values of simultaneous renewal and school partnerships. Lead teachers receive a stipend of \$250.00 per semester for a total of \$500.00 per academic year, which is commensurate with the compensation offered to cooperating teachers.

The roles and responsibilities of lead teacher include providing ongoing support to clinic teachers, cooperating teachers, and internship supervisors; participating in educational consortium meetings organized by the university to engage in educational discourse and to offer a practitioner's perspective and expertise with regard to teacher preparation; contributing to a receptacle of academic resources, such as videos, rubrics, observation protocols, and assessments, that support teacher candidates; and collaborating with university faculty in designing and executing research to add to the knowledge base of best educational practices, especially in the areas of the 19 Core Practices and how these practices can be leveraged to improve university-based teacher education at the university and beyond.

Examples of the type of work lead teachers engage in on a daily basis include offering supplemental information to clinic and cooperating teachers; observing pre-service teacher candidates; supporting problem-solving between cooperating teachers and the pre-service teacher candidates; and maintaining open lines of communication with all invested parties, including district-level personnel, school administration, university faculty, university supervisors and pre-service teacher candidates.

## Methodology

Although UConn has greatly benefitted from the contributions of the lead teachers, it is also important to understand how a university and public school partnership impacts lead teachers' perceptions of their own leadership capacity and potential. This survey-based study served as a self-study of seven teachers currently serving as lead teachers in UConn partner schools. The study was guided by two questions: 1) What is the impact of establishing a Lead teacher component when building professional development school-university partnerships? and 2) How does this role impact teachers' perceptions of their leadership capacity and potential?

A survey of three open-ended questions was administered to all lead teachers (n = 11) in the partnership, and seven teachers responded. The survey questions prompted lead teachers to describe their perceptions of their leadership capacity and potential, share positive impacts of the PDS partnership on learning in their schools and classrooms; and suggest ways UConn might contribute to their development as teacher leaders.

The survey responses were analyzed for trends and new learnings. Content analysis was the process used to categorize and summarize the written responses. The researchers began with open coding, which included the initial organization of raw data in order to make sense of the written responses. The analysis continued with interconnecting and linking similar responses (axial coding), and concluded with selective coding, which allowed the researchers to formulate a cohesive explanation of the responses to survey questions by connecting three identified categories, which are discussed in the next section.

## Discussion of Findings

### Teachers' Perceptions of Leadership

Several teachers noted that teacher leadership was a necessity and important for educational improvement at all levels. The importance of teacher leadership is widely documented in the literature as a key factor in improving schools, raising student achievement, and retaining teachers (Cosenza, 2018; Dozier, 2007).

In this study, teachers felt the partnership supported collaborative work that allowed for "openly discussing, questioning and evaluating practices and pedagogy" and that their school community and teaching has improved as a result that "could not have been accomplished independently." This statement is supported by Warren and Peel (2005), as they assert that "teachers receive a greater sense of unity, greater sense of empowerment, a higher sense of responsibility for their school's destiny and an increased level of pride" as a result of successful partnerships between schools and universities (p. 351). One teacher noted that teacher leadership is "so important and undervalued" and appreciates that the university values her opinions as a practicing teacher.

Darling-Hammond (1997) stated that "in any successful professional development process, teachers will not simply receive knowledge but also generate new knowledge about students, learning, and teaching" (p. 10). Although the Lead teacher group does not provide a formalized professional development structure, it does provide both school and university-based educators

opportunities to learn with and from one another, and to generate new knowledge that has a direct impact on shaping the next generation of teacher educators as well as shaping the important work of teachers in their own school districts. For example, Wenner and Campbell (2017) reported, “As a result of participating on a leadership team in a school-university partnership school, teacher leaders in Vernon-Dotson and Floyd’s (2012) study began to take on more formal district-level leadership roles” (p. 152).

One lead teacher’s response to the survey confirmed that participation in the school-university leadership team has shaped her perceptions of the importance of teacher leadership at the district level:

I think the greatest impact that this partnership has had on my perceptions of teacher leadership is the necessity for school districts to have a strong group of teacher leaders. This partnership validated and highlighted how teachers can make a positive difference in their district through work with others. It has been great to connect with other teachers around the state in order to hear about their experiences. I liked how we worked together toward a common goal but also spoke from our own perspectives.

Only one teacher stated that she did not think of the lead teacher role as leadership and perceived it as more of a liaison role. She was not sure if her views have changed based on the partnership. She added, “When I think of teacher leadership, I think of administration and learning to become an administrator.” The idea that leadership is reserved for building principals is not uncommon. Conversely, another teacher explained how the school-university partnership has changed her perceptions of leadership by saying, “It has strengthened my idea that you do not have to be an administrator to be an educational leader.”

Beachum and Dentith (2004) and Hunzicker (2012) found that, “By and large, teacher leaders were reported to feel more confident, empowered, and professionally satisfied via their work as a teacher leader” (Wenner & Campbell, 2017, p. 152). This assertion was implied in the following lead teacher quote: “Serving in the role of lead teacher affords staff the opportunity to impact the learning across classrooms. Through supporting and developing the next generation of teachers, lead teachers have a powerful role within the building.”

### **Impact on P-12 Learning**

Lead teachers were able to identify several ways the school-university partnership impacted student learning in their classrooms and school. Some of the findings were expected, such as how the partnership encourages teachers to reflect and that through making their practice transparent, their practice improves. Another expected finding related to the presence of a second teacher in the room and how that provides more access to instruction for students as well as different ways to explain concepts. The last anticipated finding was that the partnership affords the opportunity to share new practices and ideas across settings.

Interesting or unexpected findings shared by the lead teachers noted that public school students were motivated by the presence and participation of the university students to do their best work. Also, the teachers felt that not only did the partnership provide their students with more opportunities to connect with a caring adult for academic support, but also for emotional support.



Our understanding of the socio-emotional needs of students has become more complex, and lead teachers feel that partnering with the university can contribute to meeting more of those needs.

Lead teachers found value in knowing the experiences they were providing to university students may assist them in becoming more resilient in their in-service careers. Lead teachers acknowledged that the mistakes candidates are able to make under their tutelage would shape them into gritty educators later on. These altruistic reasons for engaging in mentoring or partnership work have been cited in the literature (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Finally, engaging in partnership work makes teaching feel less isolating for lead teachers. Vernon-Dotson and Floyd (2012), much like Wenner and Campbell (2017), assert that “Teachers who go above and beyond their job description of teaching in their isolated classroom encapsulate teacher leadership” (p. 40).

### **Supporting Teacher Leadership**

These teacher leaders offer insight into ways universities can contribute to their development as teacher leaders. This unique role affords them the opportunity to expand their teaching role beyond the constraints of their classroom walls. Additionally, it provides a lens into the instructional practices in various grade levels and content areas.

The role of lead teacher creates an opportunity for educators to network and refine their craft. In the words of one lead teacher:

I think sometimes we get so bombarded with classroom responsibilities that we can't find the time to research other things. Providing an opportunity for us to engage in discussions with colleagues outside of our school setting is great for my professional development.” In the isolating constraints of the classroom walls, educators can often crave the opportunity to network, discuss educational trends, and debate current issues. The lead teacher role is a unique collaboration with other teachers doing leadership work across school districts and content areas.

Lead teachers report that the university can contribute to their professional growth through a continued focus on highly effective teaching strategies. Exposure to these research-based strategies could then be turnkeyed to their own teaching staffs, maximizing the impact across districts. Participants have also discovered the benefits of sharing common experiences. As one lead teacher stated, “I would like to have time to discuss and share experiences with other cooperating teachers. This would support my role as a cooperating teacher, ensuring I am doing all I can to support student teachers and interns.” Ultimately, teachers cited wanting more time to discuss the work they do on a day-to-day basis.

Finally, opportunities for continued teacher leadership exist through the role of lead teacher, a role that is not present in all school environments across the state. One lead teacher reported, “I would also, personally, hope to continue the work I have done with teaching dispositions and to continue to present at conferences and the partnership summit. All this work has truly strengthened my teaching and my capacity for leadership.” Educators who are searching for opportunities to grow professionally and are not afforded opportunities in their own school buildings can continue

to build leadership potential. The following lead teacher response expresses the valuable contribution universities can have on the development of leadership:

Being the liaison for my school and the university is one of the activities that impact my own leadership capacity and potential. I am able to support student teachers and interns in the important work of becoming certified educators, while being able to meet and form relationships with university personnel allows me to have a voice in, as well as knowledge of, the program that has been designed to support the creation of new educators.

Compensation for the time teachers put into partnership work seems to be an issue for most universities. It is widely cited in the literature that teachers are underpaid and are often asked to take on extra work for little or no additional compensation. While the lead teacher role provides a \$500 stipend per year, one teacher noted that she would “love to see more compensation for the lead teachers and cooperating teachers, although [she knew] this can be a difficult task given budget priorities at the university.”

A final interesting insight by a lead teacher noted that the best way to ensure strong future teacher leaders was to enroll the most qualified and excellent teacher candidates into teacher education programs. This teacher felt the likelihood that someone will become a teacher leader is something that is apparent while they are in their pre-service careers.

### **Implications for Practice and Next Steps**

These findings provide insight in regard to furthering the capacity of UConn’s lead teachers as well as how to develop leadership capacity in all teachers. The findings also may be valuable to those who want to start a conversation with academic deans, directors, or school administrators regarding the value and impact lead teachers bring to partnership work and how to create an infrastructure for the lead teacher role in PDS partnerships.

Greenlee (2007) pointed out that the top-down bureaucratic structure of schools is a challenge for the development of teacher leadership capacity. Through partnership work, the field has an opportunity to intentionally build leadership capacity in non-traditional ways. Teacher leadership development is not typically considered one of the goals of the PDS model; however, it is likely an unintended positive outcome. Rutter and Leon (2018) state that “layering the concept of teacher leadership onto a professional development school (PDS) model elicits many possibilities to enrich student learning, future teacher learning, teacher learning, and a generally richer profession” (p. 217).

Cosenza (2018) outlines several leadership roles that emerge in PDSs such as coaching/mentoring, collaboration and sharing best practices, guest speaking, and lecturing, prestige of being a PDS, steering committee membership, and the ability to engage in reflective practice. Many of these roles or benefits emerged from our data. Knowing these are the ways schools and teachers perceive the benefits of PDS partnerships allows us to thoughtfully consider ways to strengthen these opportunities or build them into a partnership experience.

### Limitations

A limitation to this study is the small sample size. Because the sample was drawn from teachers associated with one university in one partnership model, the findings may not be generalized. In addition, the study did not report on what teachers who do not serve in the lead teacher role might be able to offer.

### Conclusion

Barth (2001) found that “a powerful relationship exists between learning and leading. The most salient learning for most of us comes when we don’t know how to do it, when we want to know how to do it, and when our responsibility for doing it will affect the lives of many others” (p. 445). Lead teachers are uniquely postured in that they are able to engage in this powerful relationship between learning and leading in order to have an impact on many lives. The school-university partnership acts as a conduit for simultaneous inquiry among all involved (Roselle et al., 2017), which ultimately benefits all stakeholders, including school and university-based teacher educators, P-12 students, and preservice teachers. The goal is that “both entities must collaborate and work together to create learning communities guided by shared beliefs about teaching and student learning, based on mutual trust and respect, and grounded in current evidence-based research and practitioner knowledge” (Vernon-Dotson & Floyd, 2012, p. 38). Our hope is that, through this collaboration, lead teachers will perceive themselves as powerful and impactful leaders, daring greatly, in their own educational communities and arenas.

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