How can teachers remain in the classroom AND be leaders in early childhood and elementary education? This reflective-practice model program develops teachers as professional leaders.

Nurturing Early Childhood Teachers as Leaders: Long-term Professional Development

Patricia A. Crawford, Sherron Killingsworth Roberts, and Rosemary Hickmann

“One of the things that I got [from the professional development program] was that you can be a leader as a teacher; that you don’t have to be in administration…. I want to stay in the classroom with the kids—that’s where I belong…. I can still be a leader in that sense. And that’s what I hope for.”

This comment was made by a program participant in the Master Teacher Program, a 3-year sequence in which a group of teachers came together for a monthly day of professional development based on a reflective practice model. The purposes of this article are to

- examine the nature of teacher leadership as nurtured through long-term professional development,
- provide an overview of this model program aimed at nurturing teacher leaders, and
- offer concluding evidence of the ways in which professional development has the potential to support teacher leadership among early childhood educators.

What Do Teacher Leaders Do?

Much has been written about the need for professional development among teachers of young children (Borko, 2004; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1993; Poulson & Vramidis, 2002). Frequently, professional development is viewed as a means for teachers to move up the early childhood career lattice or as a transition to administration. These efforts often take teachers out of the classroom.

While career changes may be a valid and sometimes desirable effect, many teachers wish to grow professionally while remaining in the classroom. They entered the early childhood profession because of their passion for working with young children. At the same time, they wish to have an increasing impact on the larger professional community beyond their classroom walls. Many early childhood teachers who hold these beliefs and aspirations are well suited for a role within the world of teacher leadership.

Teacher leadership is often described as a murky concept that refers not to a particular position, but rather to varied formal and informal leadership roles that teachers play within school communities (Johnson & Donaldson, 2007; Wasley, 1991). Teacher leadership may involve shaping curricula, choosing instructional materials, leading professional book clubs, planning staff development, serving as instructional coaches, or involvement in a host of other.

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activities (Authors, 2008/2009; Barth, 2001; Harrison & Killion, 2007).

However, teacher leadership is much more than a specific set of tasks. Rather, it is a lived philosophy, in which teachers take responsibility for contributing to the ongoing dialogue and work through which school communities are envisioned, formed, and nurtured (Sweeney, 2003).

Teacher leaders emerge.

The concept of teacher leadership is broad and extends beyond mere job descriptions, so there is rarely an official “start” date for teachers who assume these roles. Instead, teacher leaders emerge as they gain experience, confidence, and the support of their colleagues. The assumption of the teacher leader role holds many advantages for the participating teacher and the school community.

Teacher leadership provides opportunities for practitioners to develop new skills beyond the realm of instruction and to reduce the element of isolation that so often characterizes school life. Teacher leadership connects teachers across classrooms and grade levels, while at the same time making a more tangible link among faculty and administrators (Barth, 2001; Johnson & Donaldson, 2007).

From an administrative perspective, schools benefit significantly from emerging teacher leaders. Administrators can count on the support, leadership, and insights of teachers who not only have professional knowledge, but who also understand the unique culture and context of the particular school in which they work (Barth, 2006). Typically, teacher leaders not only contribute to the school’s official knowledge base, but also hold a wealth of tacit knowledge. They understand the often unarticulated values, beliefs, and guiding principles that influence teachers’ actions and inform a particular school culture. In short, they know how things work and how to get things done.

In spite of the benefits that teacher leaders offer, significant barriers may prevent teachers from assuming leadership roles in their respective schools (Barth, 2001; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Muijs & Harris, 2007). A lack of access to long-term, contextually sensitive professional development is one key factor. The remainder of this article describes the Master Teacher Program, a school-university partnership designed by the authors to support the professional development of teacher leaders in one educational system.

Who are teacher leaders?
Teacher leaders know how things work and how to get things done in a school community. They may shape curricula, choose instructional materials, lead professional book clubs, plan staff development, or serve as instructional coaches.

Teacher leadership enables practitioners to develop new skills. It connects teachers with each other and with administrators.

Program Participants
The program began with 53 self-selected participants from 21 different K-8 schools who all had the support of their building principals. Although the program was delivered in a central, urban hub, participants hailed from a large, multi-county geographic region that spanned suburban, urban, rural, and coastal settings. While not every individual school could be described as diverse, the overall district serves a very diverse population in

Characteristics of the Master Teacher Program
Administrators from a large, private school system in Florida approached local university faculty with a strong belief in long-term professional development and an opportunity to create and facilitate a 3-year program aimed at nurturing teacher leaders. Together, university and school personnel collaborated to design a program based on research-based principles which indicated that effective professional development programs are characterized by

- long-term time frames,
- active engagement among participants,
- access to research-based pedagogical strategies, and
- the presence of a collaborative, professional community (Bean, 2004; Center on English Learning and Achievement, 2002; Guskey, 2002).

Collaborative planning and development for the Master Teacher Program began approximately one year prior to program implementation, and continued throughout the program’s duration.

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In summary, teacher leadership provides opportunities for practitioners to develop new skills beyond the realm of instruction, connects teachers with each other and with administrators, and aids in the development of a collaborative, professional community.
terms of language, culture, and socioeconomics.

Participants had varied levels of experience, ranging from first-year teachers to seasoned veterans with more than 20 years of experience. Roughly half of the participants were early childhood teachers who taught in primary (K-3) settings. The remainder of the participants taught in the intermediate (4-8) grades. At the end of the program, 48 of the original 53 participants remained, three of whom had moved into full-time administrative roles within the district.

A Reflective Practice Model

The facilitators recognized the challenge of providing meaningful contexts for teachers with varying degrees of experience and from grade levels across the early childhood and elementary spectrum. In response, the reflective practice model was embraced as both a theoretical and practical approach that would allow participants to consider content in light of their own contexts and experiences (Cruikshank, 1987; Dewey, 1933; Schon, 1987; York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere, & Montie, 2005).

A three-pronged reflective approach was developed as a scaffold for participants’ professional growth and involvement in teacher leadership. Self-study, inquiry, and action research were the three prongs proposed as foundations for long-term professional development and as the recursive path to becoming teacher leaders (Bean, 2004; Copeland, Birmingham, de la Cruz, & Lewin, 1993; Guskey, 2002; Kazemi & Franke, 2004).

- First, participants were asked to engage in various self-study activities, including regular journaling and analysis of a final video project.
- Second, approaches to inquiry were modeled by the facilitators and promoted through small-group activities, discussions, and professional reading study groups. Self-study and inquiry were the facilitative modes put in place on a daily, weekly, and monthly schedule.
- Each year, in an effort to apply the reflective practitioner model in their own classroom settings, participants worked to refine and execute an action research question.

The three-pronged approach, inspired by Dewey’s (1933) reflective practitioner agenda, includes this important challenge: “Rather than behaving purely according to impulse, tradition, or authority, teachers can be reflective—they can deliberate their actions with open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and intellectual responsibility” (p. 17).
Participants’ open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and intellectual responsibility were addressed through
- journaling,
- informal discussion groups,
- cooperative learning activities,
- professional reading study groups, and
- action research projects.

This commitment to reflective practice was integrated into each monthly meeting and encouraged through expectations for participants that allowed both the necessary time and space to spawn rich opportunities for growth as professionals and emerging teacher leaders.

During every meeting, pedagogical strategies—such as jigsaw and affinity exercises that emphasized investment in the reflective practice conceptual framework—were introduced.

- In jigsaw activities, individual groups focused on different, but related, information. Participants were then regrouped so they could share their expertise, while integrating new information presented by peers who focused on other related areas of learning (Aronson & Patnoe, 1997).
- Affinity exercises provided a guided format in which participants reflected upon and visually documented personal and collective understandings of key concepts.

Through the inclusion of these and other related activities, facilitators attempted to create an atmosphere in which participants could question established practices, brainstorm enhancements and solutions, and engage in ongoing reflection. Furthermore, the action research projects allowed participants to identify a particular issue or passion as an area to explore.

**Three Prongs of the Master Teacher Program**

- Participants engaged in various self-study activities, including regular journaling and analysis of a final video project.
- Approaches to inquiry were modeled by the facilitators and promoted through small-group activities, discussions, and professional reading study groups. Self-study and inquiry were put in place on a daily, weekly, and monthly schedule.
- Each year, participants worked to refine and execute an action research question.

**Dual Levels of Inquiry**

In terms of content, the program was designed to expand participants’ pedagogical horizons while adding specificity to their particular inquiry interests.

The first year focused on frameworks for best practices. This initial year laid the foundation for teacher leaders as they were asked to share a handout and related information about a professional development topic in their home schools each month.

The second year focused more specifically on writing across the curriculum and included topics related to emergent writing, composition of various genres, and integrating writing into children’s explorations. Participants were encouraged to share these strategies with their colleagues in order to build confidence and experience related to teacher leadership.

The third year focused on the theme of professional mentoring and teacher leadership in an effort to support participants as they transitioned out of the program and moved forward as teacher leaders to promote systemic change.

The Master Teacher Program facilitators envisioned the program as one that invited dual levels of inquiry. The primary purpose of the program was to support participating teachers as they engaged in thoughtful, reflective inquiry about their own practice. The long-term goal was to nurture teacher leaders who would continue to mature and make contributions to the profession.

Program facilitators also envisioned the program as a venue in which they too could engage in inquiry—an action research setting in which they could pose questions related to the effectiveness of this particular professional development program and participants’ responses to it (Crawford, Roberts, & Hickman, 2008/2009). Data was collected throughout the program in the form of program application profiles, field notes, monthly evaluations, annual surveys, and end-of-program summative surveys.

**Lessons Learned From Early Childhood Participants**

At the beginning of the Master Teacher Program, two factors were notable about the participants who taught in the early childhood grades.
- The genuine joy and satisfaction they appeared to receive through their work with young children.
- Elements of a professional self-perception that became apparent as they initially interacted with teachers from varied grade levels across the school system.
Many of the primary grade teachers reported that prior to the program they rarely engaged in professional conversations with teachers of students in the older grades. They were therefore reticent to initiate or advocate for ideas and solutions in small-group or faculty meetings. Their collective attitude was summed up with this participant quote recorded in one facilitator’s journal: “We are just kindergarten teachers.” Within the context, this quote implied that expectations would be less for early childhood educators’ ideas than for teachers of older grades.

The self-perception of the early childhood educators in relationship to intermediate teachers was also captured in these survey responses.

• “I was terrified the first time we met. I just kept wondering what the other teachers would think of me. It was really scary even walking into the room.”
• “It was very scary having to have that long drive with the teachers in the older grades.”
• “I couldn’t believe that I was chosen to participate. I worried that the other teachers would think that I was just the kindergarten teacher.”

The facilitators planned for pieces of the professional development program, such as professional readings and action research, to not only increase early childhood teachers’ interactions with other teachers, but also to boost the perceptions of their professional selves.

Interesting growth patterns from the early childhood teachers were evident throughout the program. In the initial applications, teachers were asked to articulate their hopes and goals for the program. Not one applicant mentioned anything related to teacher leadership. On the contrary, quotes from the vast majority of participants reported that they most hoped to gain new teaching strategies and techniques, such as “I want to learn new ways to teach reading” and “I’m a new teacher and need every strategy I can get!”

At the end of the program, a summative survey with open-ended questions asked participants to list strategies they had learned and to identify the most important gains made through their involvement in the program. Although each participant was able to list numerous strategies that had been acquired, very few included pedagogy among the most significant elements gained.

Instead, an analysis of their responses exposed several interrelated themes. Teachers responded that the most significant aspects to be valued from the experience included:

• engagement in a collaborative community,
• increased confidence or courage, and
• a sense of empowerment, all of which serve as important scaffolds to teacher leadership.

**Scaffolds for Teacher Leadership**

**Collaboration**

Many participant comments addressed the significance of having the time and opportunity to interact with colleagues. Teachers noted the benefits derived from interacting with faculty from both inside and outside their schools, and within and across grade levels. These relationships offered a
sense of camaraderie and validation that led them to take risks like these.

- “I’m in a small school. The opportunity to meet with others let me know I was okay.”
- “The realization of the support I have in the school system. It enables me to risk more in order to become a better teacher.”
- “It was good to share with others who are like-minded and try new things together. I do not think I’d have done as much without knowing that others were trying it, too.”

Confidence and Courage

More than two-thirds of the participants indicated that confidence and/or courage were among their most significant gains. Early childhood teachers noted their growth in comments like these:

- “[I gained] the courage to try new methods, explore options, become a leader at my school.”
- “It’s made me more confident, more productive and more of an asset to my school.”
- “The first thing that comes to mind is confidence. With confidence I am able to approach new situations knowing that I can succeed.”
- “Confidence and validation to try new ideas based on research and a philosophy for learning rather than a mixture of activities that have no common thread.”

Empowerment

Responses related to empowerment issues were less straightforward. Notably, about half the participants mentioned some aspect of the program that led them to experience increased feelings of empowerment.

However, a newly gained sense of empowerment can also spawn conflicted feelings and perceptions. For example, emerging teacher leaders eager to share new ideas with colleagues may worry that they could be perceived as condescending or patronizing. Purposeful conversations about the tricky nature of empowerment and perceptions of support or lack thereof helped both to validate and diffuse some of these worries.

The following quotes from monthly evaluations illustrated participants’ contradictory feelings related to empowerment and teacher leadership:

- “Teachers know they can bounce things off me and I can help them. My ideas and suggestions carry some weight.”
- “It has been difficult bringing information back to school.”

Concluding Remarks

Within the Master Teacher Program, the venue of long-term professional development interfaced with ongoing components of reflective practice to provide the systemic change needed to create and nurture teacher leaders. The early childhood educators who participated in this 3-year cohort left with a greater sense of confidence, courage, collaboration, and empowerment that led to professional growth.

The following sentiment from a final program evaluation form captured a sense of authentic teacher leadership that was spawned by her professional development experience:

“When I began, I knew I was a caring teacher, but there was no way to measure what I did. Now, I have grown so much from within because of all the people here…who took time to listen, care, and love teaching as I do. Now, I move forward to take my knowledge to share.”

The opportunity to nurture early childhood teacher leaders through long-term professional development

Ongoing and reflective professional development opportunities can benefit participants, their colleagues, administrators, and the entire school system.
provides an important venue for often-overlooked primary teachers to move into leadership positions within their schools and to find their professional voice. In this way, ongoing and reflective professional development can benefit the participants, their colleagues, the administrators, and the entire school system.

Teacher leaders, born of high-quality professional development programs, have the tacit knowledge of research-based, best practices, and possess the critical knowledge of the cultures of their home schools so necessary to facilitate change.

**References**


**In Memoriam—Cindy Nail**

Cindy Nail will be remembered for her love of fun and passion for children. She served on the SECA Board during the term of Margaret Puckett, SECA President (1986-1987), and Margaret shared these thoughts about Cindy.

“She was a member of the Board during my term and was incredibly sharp, caring, an articulate child advocate and was a ton of fun—ever so witty.

If my memory serves me correctly, she was the first to gather a bunch of former Board members in the hotel one evening during a SECA conference, where in spoof fashion we “organized” with an agreement for the winter Board meeting. She took notes (which were distributed as “minutes”) and encouraged many of the “policies” (fines for tardiness and others). It was either this first meeting or the second that the group named itself the FOSSILS.”

Cindy spent the last 14 years in Germany as a civilian employee of the U.S. Army in Trier, Germany. She was President (1986-1987), and Margaret shared these thoughts about Cindy.

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Put These Ideas Into Practice!

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**Characteristics of effective professional development programs**

- long-term time frames
- active engagement among participants
- access to research-based pedagogical strategies
- the presence of a collaborative, professional community

**Components of the Master Teacher Program**

- **Self-study activities**, including regular journaling and analysis of a final video project, involved every teacher.
- Approaches to inquiry were modeled by the facilitators and promoted through small-group activities, discussions, and professional reading study groups.
- Participants explored an action research question.

**Scaffolds for teacher leadership**

**Collaboration . . .**

interacting with faculty from both inside and outside schools, and within and across grade levels.

**Confidence and Courage . . .**

to try new methods, explore options, and become a leader.

**Empowerment . . .**

to share new ideas with colleagues

**Tips for establishing effective professional development partnerships**

- **Look for like-minded educators** — School-university partnerships are more likely to thrive when both parties have similar belief systems about teaching and learning.
- **Keep everyone on board** — Regularly gather and respond to feedback. Share program information and progress with district and building-level administrators to enhance communication and gain support.
- **Create an inviting, stimulating, and honorable experience** — Ask that participants voluntarily make applications to the program that require a statement of goals and letter of administrative support. Participants then feel that they are chosen and feel honored to be part of the program. By offering many choices of topics, teacher research projects, and learning experiences, participants’ sense of ownership can be sustained throughout a long-term program.

**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.