Urban ELL Facilitators Inquire into their Leadership Practice:

Teacher Leader Action Research

Teacher-initiated research has flourished over recent decades in spite of increased external specification regarding educational outcomes for students (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Meyers & Rust, 2003). Over this same period, notions of leadership as part of a broader system of organizational capacity have increasingly included teachers as instructional leaders (Smylie, Conley, & Marks, 2002). Roles such as specialist, facilitator or coach have surfaced as popular means of sharing leadership and achieving instructional improvement goals in schools and districts (Gallucci, Van Lare, Yoon, & Boatright, 2010; Mangin & Stoelinga, 2008). Yet, despite the proliferation of teacher leadership and the continuing production of teacher research, there have been few reports of research initiated by teacher leaders.

This paper takes up this gap. We challenge the assumption that teachers exercising leadership are automatically experts who can model and guide ambitious ‘best practices’ and support adult professional learning, especially in rapidly reforming contexts. The skills and activities associated with teacher leadership (e.g., gathering or interpreting student data, relating to and engaging teachers in instructional dialogue) add up to a tall order for professionals who are often in ambiguous and contextually-dependent roles (Poglinco, Bach, Hovde, Rosenblum, Saunders, & Supovitz, 2003). We propose action research as one means of supporting teacher leadership development. We argue that when teacher leaders consider themselves to be researchers, not just consumers of research, they are exercising leadership. When they form networks to share their knowledge (e.g., through the publication and presentation of their own work), they are designing their own professional development to help reshape instructional practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).
This paper summarizes three action research reports written by teacher leader researchers. The teacher leaders facilitate instruction and support services for students who are English language learners in Highline School District (HSD), an urban district in the Pacific Northwest region. We use the recently released Teacher Leader Model Standards (Teacher Leader Exploratory Consortium, 2011) to demonstrate how practitioner research can support inquiry-oriented teacher leadership.

Inquiry-Oriented Teacher Leadership

While debates over teacher quality and professionalization continue at a policy level, teachers are increasingly called upon in schools to lead reform efforts (Mangin & Stoelinga, 2008; Supovitz, 2008), often with little or no recognition for accomplishing work that is vital to achieving improvement goals (Berry, 2011). Traditionally, leadership for teachers has been limited to department, grade level, or committee chairs and mentor or “teacher-on-special-assignment” roles (Smylie, 1994, 1995; Wasley, 1991; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Over the past decade, however, notions of instructional leadership aimed at systemic improvement have increasingly included teachers as instructional leaders in educational reforms (Smylie, Conley, & Marks, 2002). Leadership has been described as distributed (or stretched) over various school-level contexts and as instructional, or focused on improvement in the core of the profession—teaching and learning (Elmore, 1995; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). Recently, roles such as instructional coach or facilitator in specialist areas such as teaching English learners have surfaced as increasingly popular means of sharing leadership within schools (Taylor, 2008, Gallucci, et al., 2010; Portin, Russell, Samuelsen, & Knapp, forthcoming). Unfortunately, research suggests that teachers are often ill-prepared for these new roles, the roles themselves are
often ambiguously defined, and the field of teacher leadership has developed from a largely uncritical and atheoretical literature base (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

It is widely recognized that teacher leaders require a range of knowledge, skills, and dispositions to influence and enact instructional improvement across organizational contexts including, for example, working collaboratively with their peers, understanding change processes and the dynamics of adult learning, and navigating political contexts (Crowther, Kaagen, Ferguson, & Hann, 2009; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Murphy, 2005; Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010). Recently developed Teacher Leader Model Standards (2011) define seven “domains” of teacher leadership and the functions associated with each domain. The domains of teacher leadership practice include: fostering a collaborative culture, accessing and using research to improve instructional practice, promoting professional learning, facilitating improvements in teaching and learning, promoting the use of assessment data, improving outreach and collaboration with families and the community, and advocating for the profession. The standards illustrate what York-Barr and Duke (2004) have defined as teacher leadership—namely, the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of the school community to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement. Across the identified domains and associated functions of teacher leadership activity, one characteristic and set of skills stands out: adoption of an inquiry stance that promotes reflection on problems of leadership practice as well as investigation into instructional challenges within school or district contexts.

**Developing an Inquiry Orientation to Teacher Leadership: The Case of ELL Facilitators in Highline School District**

Cochren-Smith and Lytle (2009) define *inquiry as stance* as “a way of knowing and being in the world of educational practice.” They suggest that practitioner research is “a
continuous process with the ultimate purpose of enriching students’ learning and life chances” (p. viii). Action research—the term commonly used to describe practitioner research—has been defined as a family of research methodologies which pursue action (or change) and research (or understanding) at the same time (Mills, 2011; Stringer, 2008). The goals of action research in education are the improvement of instructional practice, a better understanding of that practice, and ultimately, an improvement in critical student outcomes. Action research achieves its goals by using a cyclic or spiral process which alternates between action and critical reflection. Action research is one means to support the work of teacher leadership through a process of systematic documentation, reflection, and publication of findings. Asking questions about instruction with classroom teachers, collecting data related to those questions, analyzing and reflecting on the data, and taking action based on findings—the teacher leaders described in this report find ways to enhance their leadership and facilitation practices as well as engage their classroom peers in instructionally-focused conversations.

Beginning in 2009, English Language Learner (ELL) facilitators in Highline School District were invited to participate in an action research course; in the fall of 2010, Koontz (ELL Director in HSD) contracted with Gallucci (University of Washington) to teach a district-based action research course and to provide support for the ELL facilitators in their inquiry projects. The teacher leaders and Koontz met with Gallucci for approximately 20 “class” hours over a seven-month period; facilitators also met individually with the instructor for three to four one-hour sessions to discuss their action research. Between eight and nine ELL facilitators and their Director participated in the course. Over three years, they have developed a group identity as inquiry-oriented teacher leaders (Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010). In this paper, we present
summaries of three action research projects and discuss the projects in relation to the domains of teacher leadership activity as described by the Teacher Leader Model Standards (2011).

**Reading Teacher Leader Action Research**

In this section of the paper, we present summaries of three action research projects conducted in HSD during 2010-2011. The first action research summary (Forman) addresses the challenge of supporting teachers of English Language Learners in high school content classrooms. The second report summarizes an investigation by Fukano into actions that an ELL facilitator can take to support elementary classroom teachers using English Language Development assessment data. Finally, Hoff, a district-based teacher leader, summarizes her investigation about providing support for newcomer ELL students in two elementary classrooms through collaboration with their teachers. Each action research summary is written in the individual researcher’s voice (to convey each teacher leader’s authorship and experience). Following the summaries, we return to third person voice as we jointly analyze and discuss the examples of teacher leader action research.

**Inquiry into Student Experiences: Using Student Surveys to Inform General Education Teachers about Their English Language Learners** (Stephanie Forman)

Around the country, populations of ELL students are rising, making public schools more diverse and presenting new challenges to schools that may be ill-equipped to offer services to students with a wide range of language, academic, and social needs. Many secondary schools struggle to provide equitable access to rich learning opportunities for ELL students, while also maintaining support to ensure their success (Cho & Reich, 2010). There is a clear need at the high school level to provide assistance for ELL students in general education classrooms. Subject-area teachers need the support of ELL specialists to build skills to help their ELL
students engage with grade-level material. As an ELL specialist, my role is to bridge between the ELL department and content area teachers who serve ELL students.

As a new staff at my school this year, I began looking for opportunities to collaborate with classroom teachers. I wondered how a survey of ELL students in their classrooms might help three general education teachers build knowledge of student needs and experiences. I planned a collaborative inquiry process with the teachers to answer their questions about how best to serve the ELL students in their content area classes with the goal of making ELL experiences more visible. I collaborated with the teachers by (1) meeting with them to discuss their ELL students and (2) attending each teacher’s class to observe the students and the classroom environment. I then met with each teacher to design a student survey—each teacher’s survey took on a different focus based on the interests of the teacher and our knowledge of the students. I developed and administered the surveys and then met with each teacher to analyze and discuss the data. I asked each teacher to reflect on the inquiry process and to share their final thoughts with me. I collected and analyzed teacher interview notes, classroom observation notes, student survey data, and my reflective journal notes.

Findings indicated that the teachers each learned a great deal about the needs of their ELL students through this collaborative inquiry process. For example, one teacher explicitly targeted motivation and engagement (in the survey) after observing that her students were not participating or turning in assignments with a frequency equal to her non-ELL students. Following the collaborative inquiry, all three teachers recognized the need for students to develop greater self-advocacy skills and confidence to participate in classroom discussions.

The study taught me about a number of actions that I can take in my role as an ELL facilitator. Teachers at my school might benefit, for example, from further professional
development about second language acquisition, culturally responsive teaching practices, and specific strategies to engage English Language Learners. The study highlighted the need to increase collaboration between the school’s ELL department and general education teachers, particularly around building student self-advocacy skills and corresponding with families. The outcomes of the study indicated that teachers want support to improve ELL access and participation.

**Data-Driven Planning for English Language Learners: Utilizing ELD Data to Support Classroom Instructional Decisions** (Shawnda Fukano)

Teachers at my elementary school have been teaching English Language Learners (ELLs) for years, but still doubt their abilities to meet these students’ language-specific needs. Despite the growth of ELL students in public schools in the United States, teachers continue to receive minimal training on ELL issues (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008). As a result, elementary teachers are often not equipped with the knowledge and strategies necessary to meet the needs of the linguistically and culturally diverse students in their classes.

This study was designed to focus on this issue and to support classroom teachers at my elementary school to learn about the abilities of ELLs, not only their academic abilities, but their language abilities as well. The focus questions of this project were:

- In what ways does knowledge of English Language Development (ELD) stages and student-specific ELD data help teachers to set reasonable goals and expectations for ELL students?
- How does the knowledge and data inform teachers’ instructional decisions?
- What support from the ELL facilitator aids this process?

Teachers took part in my study at varying levels. All teachers participated in professional development around the stages of second language acquisition. Classroom teachers completed ELD checklists regarding the ELD students in their classrooms. I conducted more focused planning and collaboration about the ELD data and its use with the kindergarten team (N=5). In
order to gain insight into how the work impacted student achievement, I spent additional time in
one kindergarten classroom, supporting the teacher to address her ELL students’ learning needs.
Data analyzed included teacher surveys, teacher interviews, field notes from grade level
meetings and classroom observations, and relevant artifacts.

Findings occurred at multiple levels. School-wide, survey data collected in October
(before the professional development session) and again in February suggested that the ELD
training increased teachers’ knowledge and awareness of ELD stages and the needs of their ELL
students. Over time, considerations about ELL student needs increased through my participation
in the kindergarten team meetings and some teachers tried out new instructional strategies. When
I worked daily with an individual teacher in instructional planning and classroom teaching, I
found that her consideration of the individual needs of each ELL student increased. It seemed
that regular, ongoing facilitation led to a high level of implementation of new strategies.

My findings carried important implications and learning regarding my role as the school-
level ELL facilitator. Most helpfully, they provided me with a framework for designing and
structuring my work. As many ELL facilitators find, my position is loosely defined. The study
gave me a way of organizing my work across whole staff activities (such as trainings,
consultation, and resource management); grade-level activities (analysis of data, goal-setting,
instructional planning, and facilitation of peer-observations); and work with individual teachers
(analyzing data for individual students, classroom demonstrations, and individual consultation).

My hope is that as I work with other individual teachers, they will share their learning
within their grade levels—encouraging other teachers to seek my support as well as building
capacity within their teams.

The ELL Specialist and the Classroom Teacher: Providing Support for Newcomer English
Language Learners (Rachel Hoff)
Amy and Jennifer are young teachers, both in their third year of teaching. They are energetic, full of ideas, and their classrooms are warm and welcoming environments where high expectations and hard work are the norm for both students and the teachers. These are the classrooms where Fikriya and Jose began their school career in the United States, just days after immigrating from Iraq and Mexico, respectively.

This action research project began the week after Fikriya joined Jennifer’s class. Jennifer described feeling “excited but incompetent” about having a beginning English language learner in her class. Jose had been in Amy’s class for a couple of months the prior year, but Amy still said she was “constantly wondering if he is where he should be” and what expectations she should have for him. The purpose of this action research study was to look at how I, as a district ELL specialist, could work with general education teachers who have newcomer ELLs in their blended classrooms. Specifically, as I worked with the teachers, I wanted to find out what the teachers learned, what changed in their classroom practice, what changed for the newcomer students, and what facilitated those changes. In the process I hoped to learn more about what these teachers needed and how I and other ELL facilitators, both district and school-based, could help provide for those needs.

Data collection for this project focused on both the teacher and the students. First, I collected information on the teachers’ classroom practice asking: how did they structure their classrooms and provide instruction for the newcomer ELL student? Secondly, I developed a plan of support with the teachers. The format of my support plan with Amy and Jennifer had some characteristics of coaching but was more within the model of “consulting and collaborating” as described by Lipton and Wellman in their “continuum of interaction patterns” (2001). Finally, I
collected information on the effects of the support—what did teachers do differently as a result of our work?

I found that these teachers wanted, needed, and benefited from my collaboration, my ideas about scaffolding instruction, and the provision of resources such as high-interest reading materials. The teachers began a collaboration in which Fikriya and Jose (and eventually, another student, Christian) participated in some cross-class grouping in various subject areas. This resulted in the students themselves collaborating for some small group instruction in the areas of math and English language development (ELD) and vocabulary. For example, all three students went to Jennifer’s class for math instruction (at the same time that the rest of the class was having math). Observation data suggested that the students were more engaged and excited about their work following the collaboration.

This study has implications for much of my project work within the ELL department. For instance, one project in which I am involved is developing literacy frameworks for newcomer ELLs. Another project is putting together newcomer resource kits to support beginner ELLs in schools with the blended model. Whereas before, I have had hunches and suspicions about what beginner ELLs and their teachers need, this action research has helped me develop those ideas more concretely. Now, I see that in order to help provide beginner ELLs what they need in the general education classroom, the teachers need opportunities and structures to collaborate, ideas on how to work with these students, and the resources to be able to do all of this.

Discussion

In this paper, as a group of researchers, we have linked action research to inquiry-oriented teacher leadership. We presented summaries of action research projects conducted by three of this paper’s authors, all ELL facilitators from Highline School District. The summaries
demonstrated how inquiry supported the professional learning of the facilitators and their teaching colleagues as well as enriched learning outcomes for students who are English language learners in district schools.

These action research studies demonstrated an inquiry-orientation to teacher leadership as embedded in the Teacher Leader Model Standards (Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, 2011). Forman engaged three classroom teachers in collecting survey data from students in order to improve their abilities to address ELL students’ diverse learning needs (Domain II: Accessing and Using Research to Improve Practice and Student Learning). She used what she knew about adult learning to respond to each teacher individually, working to develop surveys and subsequent plans that met each teacher’s instructional approach, content area, and students’ needs (Domain III: Promoting Professional Learning for Continuous Improvement; Domain IV: Facilitating Improvements in Instruction and Student Learning).

The study conducted by Hoff was illustrative of the Teacher Leader Model Standards Domain I (Fostering a Collaborative Culture to Support Educator Development and Student Learning). Hoff employed her facilitation skills to “create trust among a group of elementary colleagues, develop collective wisdom, build ownership, and action that support[ed] student learning” (Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, 2011, p. 14). Working from a district-level position, Hoff conducted a case study in one elementary school that impacted her own understanding of what teachers needed when newcomer ELL students were included in their general education classrooms. Hoff utilized her knowledge of ELL instructional strategies and her access to resources to support the teachers’ development (Domain I).

Fukano most directly promoted the use of assessment data for school improvement (Domain V) when she provided whole school professional development related to understanding
English Language Development levels and the interpretation of ELD student data. She provided further professional support as she worked closely with one grade level team and coached one teacher at the classroom level. Her multi-level strategy for supporting teacher development led Fukano to a deeper understanding of how she as one facilitator in a school of 35 teachers could “create a climate of trust and critical reflection in order to engage colleagues in challenging conversations about student learning data that lead to solutions to identified issues” (Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, 2011, p. 18).

From our different positions, we have sought to institutionalize a set of practices in Highline School District that are reflective and research-informed. Action research has allowed us to focus a critical eye on our work, specifically on the practice of ELL facilitation. As we gained clearer insight into these practices, we improved our ability to lead instructional improvement and ultimately have a positive impact on students. Over the past three years, we have looked deeply into how we use tools and resources to support students. We have chronicled how staff members, including ELL teachers, general education teachers, paraprofessionals, principals, and community partners, can collaborate to meet the needs of their student populations. We have investigated specific strategies targeted at supporting ELL students in their learning and in their pathways to success. Although each research project has been limited in scope, the inquiry stance that we are developing through research permeates our work.

Research suggests that increasing the likelihood that talented teachers remain in the profession requires opportunities to assume new roles and responsibilities (Behrstock & Clifford, 2009). Inquiry-oriented teacher leadership is one avenue to build expertise and to support the intellectual capacity of teachers in the profession. Teacher leaders are empowered when they are provided time and support for participating in action research. In this context, they can reflect on
their work and generate public reports that further process and develop their practice and lead to professional recognition. The action research we are developing in Highline School District provides a model for using “the expertise that already exists in the teaching force” (TL Exploratory Consortium, 2011, p. 13). Such teacher leader inquiry can lead to increased professional collaboration, teacher development, and student learning outcomes in schools and districts. It can provide teachers a much-needed voice in educational improvement efforts.
References


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