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# Beyond empty vessels and bridges: toward defining teachers as the agents of school change

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One of the greatest challenges facing education systems is implementing the changes that make schools, and therefore, nations, internationally competitive. The resistance to change, the possibilities of change, and the roles the many and various stakeholders play in leading change have been noted by scholars on the topic of change in school. While their viewpoints may vary, one point of agreement among these authors is that change is the only constant, but stories of entrenchment and resistance remain a dominant narrative. In this article, we seek to disrupt the traditional views of school reform by redefining the roles teachers can play in school change.

**Keywords:** teacher change agent; educational change; school reform



One of the implications of change being the only constant in education is that educators must now accept the reality that change occurs as a matter of natural course. Accepting that premise can initiate a discussion of who is responsible for making change happen in education. In the literature, this question remains largely unanswered with the majority remaining 'fixed' in a focus on one of two models. The first features the teacher as a recipient and implementer of the change initiatives of others, as is often the case with national policy efforts. The second features the teacher as a leader of prescribed reform efforts, such as those found in policies or in initiatives created by school district and school-level administrators.

Both models, when considered in light of the ever-changing context of schooling, appear to view classroom-based teachers as having little to no agency as a professional or worse, as being incapable of initiating school-wide change of their volition. Moreover, both models also place more value on the school's context rather than on the teachers' capacities to pursue change independently. Under these prevailing models, it is very difficult for teachers to pursue school improvement initiatives without the help of traditional school leaders.

Accepting the premise that change is now the only constant, the time has come for a new model that is more consistent with the contemporary notion that improvement is a continuous path of local reform. When we consider the slow pace of localized change in the service of the students, we can raise another model of school change. This model should be one in which teachers are more active than recipients

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and more central to school improvement than taking the lead on implementing externally driven reforms. After reviewing the two dominant models of the role of the teacher in change efforts, we find that both are insufficient for these times of high-stakes accountability. We propose a third model, one in which teachers who possess specific areas of expertise become the primary agents of school change and are empowered to generate the improvements their schools need to better serve their students.

## The prevailing model: teacher as recipient of school change efforts

The dominant model for understanding school change is one that has its roots in the old relationships of management and labor (Bidwell 1965). This model views the teacher as a passive recipient of imposed changes on the school. In other words, the teacher is responsible for implementing externally mandated reform initiatives. Those who study reform from this perspective tend to focus primarily on the factors that might explain teachers' willingness to change their behaviors, attitudes, and/or beliefs. In the field of education, much of the work that derives from the diffusion of innovation literature of Rogers (2003), focuses on studying the stages teachers go through as they learn to implement new initiatives. The primary emphasis in this model is on following the course and progression of change as determined by someone other than the teacher who is actually experiencing the change process. More often that focus has been on the authoritarian role of 'others', such as policymakers or administrators, who direct the implementation of the proposed changes (Hargreaves 2007). In short, in this model, teachers appear as passive recipients expected to implement and adopt the expert's change without question; a change is considered successful only if its implementation corresponds with the outsider's view of what results should look like. For example, teachers are often told 'Do it … or you're bye-bye' (Datnow and Castellano 2001, 233) and as such, are considered to be 'dreaded saboteur[s]' (Miller 2008, 35) if they do not conform to the mandated initiative. Put another way, the teacher as recipient model is premised on the principles of 'scientific management' (Taylor 1911) that teachers work for school leaders, thereby incorrectly assuming that teachers have little to add to the creation of new forms of schooling. We argue that, while it is true that teachers do have to manage externally mandated change, they can also be initiators of change within their own school environments at the same time.

## The emerging model: teacher as leader

During the last 20 years, the education community has slowly been shifting its view of teachers from one in which teachers are the implementers/recipients of a reform strategy to one in which teachers assume leadership roles that have previously been considered the responsibilities of principals and superintendents (Barth 2001). In this teacher leadership model, teachers should take charge of their professional landscape by becoming more active participants in plans for school improvement. For example, Lieberman and Miller (1999) argued that school improvement strategies that do not include teachers' participation and leadership are 'doomed to failure' (xi) because collaboration among educators is now required to accomplish change.

What compounds the problem of putting teachers at the center of school change is that teacher leadership 'means different things to different groups' (Murphy 2005,

11). In an effort to address what Crowther et al. (2002) called the 'ambiguity surrounding [teacher leadership] in the literature' (5), Murphy (2005) conducted an extensive review of the teacher leadership literature which revealed 13 different definitions of the term 'teacher leader'. He then synthesized these varying but related definitions into three critical elements of teacher leadership: 1) a sense of vision; 2) relational considerations; and 3) enabling conditions.

As Murphy (2005) noted, a primary component of leadership in general is a sense of vision towards which the organization should direct its efforts. In schools, it is often the case that the 'vision' is not something the teachers themselves are asked to create, but rather is something historically entrusted to school leaders (Harrison and Killion 2007; Kalin and Zuljan 2007). In standard practice, schools' visions are 'generally presented as givens' (Murphy 2005, 15) to teachers, thereby removing one of the three essential attributes of teacher leadership and likely constraining their influences on the school.

Murphy's (2005) second attribute, teacher leaders' relationships with and influence on others in the school or the community, is commonly found in the literature. However, in order for teachers to lead, they must work in supportive contexts in which the principal serves both as 'buffer' and as advocate for teachers' ideas (Danielson 2006; Katzenmeyer and Moller 2001; Moore Johnson and Donaldson 2007). For example, in Anderson's (2004) study focusing on the relationship(s) between teacher leaders and their principals, the teachers reported that their principals influenced them much more than they influenced their principals. As one teacher leader commented when asked about her ability to lead in her school: 'I think everything [my success as a teacher leader] has to do with the administrator' (104).

In a school environment where 'everything' depends on the administrator, the principal inadvertently creates a culture in which teacher leaders are a means to further the administration's goals or vision (i.e., Mangin 2007). Consider the case when a principal comments, 'They're [teacher leaders] the kind of people that when I want something done, and want it done it well, I go to [them]' (Anderson 2004, 102). This principal's honest assessment of the talent with which he works highlights that the focus of change remains clearly in the hands of the administration and not in the minds and hands of teacher leaders. Teachers are expected to collaborate, but are not asked for their vision and often are working within someone else's context.

In sum, what the teacher recipient and teacher leader conceptualizations suggest about teachers contradicts what we have come to know about teachers' abilities to accomplish great things both inside and outside the classroom. As such, there is now a need for a model that is more consistent with the modern era of continuous improvement, where experiments in the best interests of students are part of the life of the school. The two models that currently dominate the field emphasize the teacher as either a 'blank slate' or an agent of the administration, thereby stressing the importance of maintaining school culture or climate while paradoxically trying to change it at the same time. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) argued that teachers are akin to 'sleeping giant[s]', and there are plenty who are wide awake and ready for action; it is just that the education community hasn't given them the attention they deserve. Since teachers are closest to the problem of student learning, we believe they should be the agents of change when it comes to renewing their schools to improve student learning.

**The future model: teacher as change agent**

The development of the concept of teachers as change agents has been hampered because we have yet to determine if or how a teacher leader differs from a teacher who initiates change, especially in terms of the role of each in school reform efforts. We argue the difference can be seen when comparing the teacher who returns from the latest meeting of the school improvement committee and says, 'Here's what we have to do next' with the one who initiates a literacy program for recent immigrant families in the school and seeks external funding to get it started. While the former is arguably a teacher leader, she/he is not necessarily actively working to improve the school with the agency, creativity, and license of the latter. In a time of needed school renewal, we believe we need to create more change agents than teacher leaders.

***Essential attributes of teachers as change agents***

We have suggested that teachers who are change agents are those who reach beyond their classrooms to improve the school. Because the previous literature has either labeled teacher change agents as troublesome or misunderstood the fine distinctions between them and teacher leaders, we know little about them and their possible impact on school-wide improvement. However, what we do know suggests that the most important difference between the teacher change agent and teacher leadership models is that teacher change agents have areas of expertise that allow them to take initiatives in a 'bottom up' design with the school as the unit of change, and not only the classroom.

We present four essential characteristics that separate teacher change agents from teacher leaders (Lukacs 2009). Teacher change agents: 1) can read their school environment; 2) enable the participation of their colleagues in generating solutions; 3) possess the skills to address the problems they identify in their schools; and 4) feel a sense of ownership with regard to those problems.

*Teacher change agents have contextual expertise*

Teachers who are change agents have the ability to assess the conditions in their schools. They are aware of their role in school reform and know how to describe those conditions to influence and motivate their colleagues in order to initiate school reform. While they feel confident in their skills as teachers of students within their classrooms, they more broadly possess an inner sense of direction for identifying what might improve teaching practices and/or student achievement in their schools.

To illustrate this conceptual expertise, consider what Rogers (2003) called communication channels, or 'the means by which messages get from one individual to another' (18). Thus, as a result of their contextual expertise, teacher change agents actually serve as interpersonal 'channels' when initiating change efforts. That is, their ability to be comfortable with both students and colleagues allows teacher change agents to serve as conduits for change efforts between individual classrooms and the school as a whole. This idea of contextual expertise plays a particular role in the second attribute of teacher change agents. As Fullan (2001) noted, leaders make coherence for others. Contextual expertise is a related concept in which teachers who are agents of change spot trends and can articulate them to peers in ways that engage their commitment to the reform of current practices.

*Teacher change agents have collaborative expertise*

Teacher change agents are more than members of a professional community. While all teachers are members of a school's community (even if only by virtue of the title 'faculty member'), teacher change agents actively make an effort to reach out to colleagues and to gain their commitment and energy to work on school improvements. They have an heightened sense of being able to effect interactions with their colleagues (as well as the products of those interactions), while not feeling threatened in their abilities to shape practices in the school. They possess an open-mindedness about their school and recognize that the next best idea can come from any member of the school's community. Consider the following scenario: Jerry is dismayed by the bullying he has witnessed on the playground, which prompts him to complain about 'kids today' during faculty meetings. Having witnessed the same aggressive behaviors, Anita decides to convene colleagues to establish an anti-bullying task force which then actively recruits the commitment of as many colleagues as possible (to support it and reduce the prevalence of bullying). Because he does not work actively with his colleagues, it is difficult to imagine Jerry being a teacher change agent. In contrast, Anita knows to reach out to her peers and how to influence and motivate them and values working jointly with them towards a solution.

*Teacher change agents have problem-solving expertise*

Teachers who are agents of change have deep and creative responses to working collaboratively with peers. They are comfortable making decisions, don't give up easily, and 'think outside of the box'. In addition, they are aware of the tensions created by being solution focused and preserving a collaborative environment. Teacher change agents are not afraid of taking risks, are highly motivated, and feel confident in their abilities to pursue solutions to school-wide change. Being able to remain motivated and capable of taking risks in order to maintain their commitment to their goals is also important for teacher change agents, especially since collaborating with colleagues can sometimes lead to unexpected complications. Teachers who are willing to initiate change efforts outside their own classrooms are committed to working collaboratively. They must also be confident in their ability to solve any unanticipated problems or obstacles that might arise without damaging the school community.

*Teacher change agents have ownership*

School reform literature suggests that change requires ownership and, although ownership is not explicit in the previous discussions, we argue that it is embedded in contextual, collaborative, and problem-solving expertise as a 'hidden' element. In a sense, it is an 'enabling condition' that allows for teachers to become agents of change since it is unlikely that teacher change agents would persist in pursuing a goal unless they felt a personal responsibility to do so.

## Shifting to the future

When it comes to school improvement, the policy community's search for the one best solution has proven futile. The potential of teachers as agents of school change

is vitally important if continuous improvement and school reform are to be achieved. As Garii (2008) remarked, 'the profession of teaching extends beyond the four walls of the classroom' (91), and the teacher change agent model better embodies this sentiment than do the two models that currently dominate the literature. This is not to say that the education community should necessarily give up entirely on either the teacher recipient or the teacher leadership model. However, a concerted effort is now necessary to empower the teachers who possess these attributes and to release them to pursue their improvements on a larger scale. In short, it is time to capitalize on the skills and energy of teacher change agents. Their expertise in reading their environment, working collaboratively with colleagues, and identifying, owning, and solving problems allows teacher change agents to negotiate effectively in any school setting. In sum, they are not dependent on others to facilitate their ideas for school improvement. Further, they seem well suited to adapt in a world where change is the only constant.

As Berry, Norton, and Byrd (2007) noted, the assumption that teachers are less important to the change process than administrators is so deeply ingrained that the insights of reform-minded teachers remain a largely untapped resource. As principals and other administrators come and go, the teachers who go beyond merely going through the motions of adopting a new improvement initiative or serving as links between the faculty and the administration are the only ones who can effectively 'grow' the school. Like Hess (2008), we believe that 'every teacher can have a meaningful impact in schools' (4). It is time to invest in the intellectual capital found in our schools themselves to initiate the changes that are necessary for the school to move closer to reaching all learners. Put simply, teacher change agents are the ones to whom the education community should be looking as the push for individual school renewal continues.



## Notes on contributors

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