

CONNECTING TEACHER LEADERSHIP AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP: A SYNERGISTIC PARTNERSHIP

Abstract

This paper explores the literature on teacher leadership and servant leadership; identifying connections and similarities between the two. Using the ten characteristics of servant leaders developed by Spears (2010), the characteristics and behaviours of teacher leaders and servant leaders are compared. Through this exploration a number of implications are reviewed, which in turn lead to recommendations going forward. These include how servant leadership can strengthen and inform teacher leadership by its inclusion in teacher leadership educational programs thus pointing to the possibility of a synergistic partnership.

Introduction

The importance of teacher leadership in our educational systems cannot be understated. The teacher leader is identified as being in a “unique position to make change happen” (Lieberman & Miller, 2004, p. 12) and their leadership is associated with school improvement, increased teacher agency, the democratization of schools, teacher learning, and developing a collaborative culture (Muijs & Harris, 2006; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Different approaches have been taken to strengthen or expand this form of leadership in our school systems. Examples include teacher leader programs under state or ministry initiatives, post-secondary education programs or research that identifies barriers and enablers to teacher leadership. We propose a different approach: this paper explores the connections between servant leadership and teacher leadership through the lens of the ten characteristics identified by Spears (2010) and it considers the implications of informing and

strengthening teacher leadership through a servant leadership framework. In our analysis we attempt to answer the following questions:

- What connections can be made between the characteristics of servant leadership and teacher leadership?
- What are the implications of these connections?
- How can these connections be used to inform and strengthen teacher leadership?

Servant Leadership

Robert Greenleaf coined the term servant leadership in his 1970 essay “The Servant as Leader”, where he explained that a “servant leader is servant first” (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 15). Greenleaf credits the idea of the servant as leader from his reading of *Journey to the East* by Herman Hess. The main character in Hess’ story, Leo, is a man who accompanies a group on a

mythical journey and does their chores, but he also keeps them upbeat and positive through songs and interactions with the group members. Leo disappears in this story and the group falls apart, the journey discontinues. The story's narrator comes across Leo some time later only to discover that he was actually the leader of the Order that had sponsored the journey and not the servant the narrator had thought him to be. The notion espoused in this story that a servant and a leader could be embodied by one person was something that Greenleaf believed could exist in today's world as a form of leadership. The idea of a servant as a leader is a very different perspective on leadership as it focuses on the needs of the followers and the focus of the leader is ensuring that those needs are being served (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 15). The priority for a servant leader is not their aspirations as a leader, nor the goals of the organization, but to the people that they serve as a leader. To know if a servant leader is achieving success as a leader is to simply administer what Greenleaf referred to as the best test: "do those served grow as persons, do they while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants" (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 15)?

Teacher Leadership

Defining what teacher leadership is can be quite challenging as there are overlapping and competing ideas of what it constitutes (Muijs & Harris, 2003). Our own definition of a teacher leader includes those who inspire, encourage, and empower their colleagues. This might be through sharing the interesting and innovative learning experiences of their classrooms, through participating in a mentoring project with a colleague, or through giving workshops on ideas that they are passionate about. These teachers are offering thoughtful ideas and suggestions to schools and school district challenges, they are letting their voice be heard in different contexts and they are developing new and innovative programs or

structures collaboratively with colleagues.

Looking to the literature, the idea of teacher leadership has developed over a number of waves: the first wave was limited to positions of authority or thinking of the teacher in a more managerial role such as a department head; the second wave was more aligned with the classroom context, but still gave influence to formally created positions such as curriculum coordinator or team leader. The third wave recognizes leadership as a process rather than a position (Silva, Gilbert, and Nolan, 2000). For example, Muijs and Harris (2003) describe teacher leadership as relationships between the players rather than a role, position or status. This third wave of teacher leadership is harder to delineate; "when teacher leadership is conceived of as a process rather than a positional concept, it is more difficult to articulate because it comprises an array of behaviours and characteristics rather than formalized positional duties" (Pounder, 2006, p. 534).

Connections Between Servant and Teacher Leadership

Not only does the idea of servant leadership force us to change how we think of leadership, it also demands a different model of leadership: not the traditional, hierarchical mode of leadership, but a model based on community, team-work and involving others in decision making (Greenleaf, 2003). Similarly, the understanding of teacher leadership is often described as a process and behavior, rather than a position of authority. This form of leadership is emergent and can be seen in the actions one takes rather than a position or title (Supovitz, 2018, p. 55). Teacher leadership has been closely aligned with a distributed leadership model where leadership is shared and not held within a specific position. Teacher leadership has been documented to thrive in schools that more readily embrace this distributed model (Muijs & Harris, 2003 & 2006). This form of leadership

also challenges traditional authoritarian systems in schools: that females dominate the teaching staff and males lead through administrative positions and that teachers work with students and administrators work with adults (Taylor et al, 2011).

Similarly, servant leadership is not dependent on a role or formal authority to lead, it is much bigger than that. In Greenleaf (2003), Larry Spears describes servant leadership as an approach to both life and work that is on-going, enduring, and transformational. It can be thought of as a philosophy that radiates into everything that a servant leader does in their lives. While teacher leadership is much more specific and a limited form of leadership due to its context compared to servant leadership, it has also been described as a different way to think about leadership and a way of being (Kajitani, 2015, p. 123).

The nature of the teacher leader context is that many teacher leaders are demonstrating leadership while working as full-time classroom teachers. As Burns (2003) points out, the key distinctive role of leadership is that leaders show initiative. In the case of teacher leadership, there is more going on than just initiative. Teacher leaders are often well regarded as knowledgeable colleagues who are collaborative and reflective and as a result of this, rather than simply becoming leaders, as Snell and Swanson (2000) explain, they are allowed by their peers to lead. Similarly, servant leaders earn the trust and respect of the people around them and they then choose to follow. The followers have a choice as this leadership is not about a role or a title (Ferch & Spears, 2015). Sipe and Frick (2009) further this idea by explaining that a servant leader does not use positional authority or coercion to lead, but rather moral authority.

Characteristics of Servant Leadership as a Comparison to Teacher Leadership.

Spears (2010) distilled Greenleaf's original writings into ten characteristics of servant-leaders: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to growth and community building. These characteristics describe a servant leader, what they do, how they are with their followers, and what typifies them as a leader. They also provide a comparison or connection point between teacher leadership and servant leadership, as both forms of leadership are described through the characteristics that such leaders exemplify. The literature documents many similarities between servant leadership and teacher leadership through this analysis.

Listening. One characteristic that servant leaders exhibit is listening: listening first, listening deeply and reflectively. "Only a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening first" (Greenleaf, 2008, p. 18). Servant leaders demonstrate respect, warmth, and genuine interest while they are listening as they know that true listening builds strength in those being listened to (Sipe and Frick, 2009). This characteristic has been identified in teacher leaders in the Teacher Leader Model Standards developed by the Teacher Leader Exploratory Consortium (TLEC). The consortium identified effective listening skills as an important component of how teacher leaders foster a collaborative culture. As described earlier, teacher leaders have earned the respect and trust of their peers and have developed strong collaborative relationships; listening is a very important part of building these relationships.

Empathy. Characteristics of servant leaders include striving to fully understand and empathize with others. This includes assuming good intentions of colleagues and others (Greenleaf, 2003). Servant leaders understand others and their circumstances or challenges and through this they build confidence and trust with their followers (Barbuto & Wheeler,

2007). As with listening, demonstrating empathy has been documented in teacher leaders. For example, Supovitz (2018) reported themes of empathy in his study of teacher leaders; he also connected this to how teacher leaders earn trust and rapport with their colleagues. Earning trust and confidence with colleagues is a central part of how teacher leaders lead.

Healing. An important characteristic of servant leader is that they “have the potential to heal themselves and others” (Crippen, 2010, p. 30). Through their actions as servant leaders they are facilitating a healing process and followers often look to them for support when times are difficult or something traumatic has occurred (Barbuto and Wheeler, 2007). As Robert Greenleaf also observes, this healing is to become whole and there is an awareness that this “search for wholeness is something they share,” both followers and leaders (Greenleaf, 2008, p. 37). Teacher leaders work to create a collaborative culture in an environment that is traditionally isolating and individualistic. Typically, teachers have closed their doors and taught in isolation (Taylor et al, 2011). Supovitz (2018) suggested that the teacher leaders he worked with had to develop strategies to get beyond the privacy norms that exist in schools and between teachers to gain trust and develop strong relationships. This included a focus on encouragement and support for teachers, which reflected the understanding that teachers rarely receive reassurance or acknowledgement in their work or when they went above and beyond. With this focus, these teacher leaders are filling that void in the system. Creating a connection across a culture of isolation is one example of how teacher leaders are healing themselves and their colleagues. They are also adding to the culture of the organization by actively filling what they viewed was lacking. As York-Barr and Duke (2004) explain, “the isolated culture of teaching diminishes teacher growth and professionalism” (p. 256). Teacher leaders are healing this divide with

their attention to relationships and connections.

Awareness. Being open and aware of as much as possible strengthens effectiveness as a leader; especially having a high degree of self-awareness. This awareness allows servant leaders to step aside from context and detach in order to be able to fully see all of the intricacies at play. As Greenleaf explains (2008), it is important to keep the doors of perception wide open as “able leaders are usually sharply awake and reasonably disturbed” (p. 29). Often teacher leaders are very aware of their role as a leader and are concerned with how this might affect their relationships with their peers. The awareness of this tension informs how they operate in their leadership (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). For example, Supovitz (2018) found that teacher leaders prioritize their role as teacher and approached their leadership role from a teacher perspective. He also explained how teacher leaders are aware of the legitimacy this teacher focus brings to this role, especially with the teachers they are working with or leading.

Persuasion. The servant leader does not use coercion, nor their positional authority, but rather they seek to convince others through influence (Greenleaf, 2003). They never force anyone to do anything, but provide genuine, compelling reasons for action (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2007). As Greenleaf (2006) points out, the advantages to leading by “convincement rather than coercion” are obvious (p.31). For a teacher leader the relationships that are central to their role as a leader are their primary means of influence (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Muijs and Harris (2006) explain that teacher leaders use a form of collaboration based on collegiality that they lever “for the prime purpose of securing certain outcomes linked to improving teaching and learning” (p. 964). Supovitz (2018) also describes how teacher leaders use strategies such as leading by example, earning their colleagues trust and encouraging and collaborating with their peers. They do not use traditional administrative approaches that are more coercive in nature.

Conceptualization. Servant leadership requires creativity and the ability to look at a problem or an organization from a wider perspective. This requires servant leaders to think beyond the day-to-day realities (Greenleaf, 2003) and encourage others to dream big (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2007). This can be seen in teacher leaders where they are encouraging teachers to go beyond their traditional teacher roles (Supovitz, 2018). Teacher leaders have also been recognized as skilled in possessing a solid understanding of organizational diagnosis and the “big picture” issues facing a school or school district (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Foresight. A servant leader is able to use the information and understandings available to them to reflect and predict happenings in the future. According to Sipe and Frick (2009), a servant leader is able to create and imagine possibilities while anticipating future likelihoods, then move ahead with purpose. Barbuto and Wheeler (2007) also describe servant leaders as being able to anticipate consequences of decisions correctly. Foresight involves being connected to the present as it is informed by the past and as it informs the future. Greenleaf (2006) explains that the ability to view the past, present, and future in this way is a central tenant of leadership. Acker-Hocevar and Touchton (1999) observed that teacher leaders can envision the broader impact of decisions made by administrators and teachers. There is also the clear connection between teacher leadership and school improvement (Muijs & Harris, 2003, 2008; York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Teacher leadership is seen as a strong driver for moving educational change forward in a school system. Muijs and Harris (2003) identify some of the main reasons teacher leadership is associated with school improvement; including how it empowers teachers, how activities such as collaborating with peers strengthened morale, and how shared leadership can lead to higher recruitment and retention. It has also been noted that teacher leaders often do not associate their actions with the term leadership, rather they identify as teachers first, not leaders first (Supovitz, 2018; Muijs & Harris, 2006). This positions

them in a very strong place as they are more able to make decisions based on what is best for students and supports their colleagues. Their perspective and foresight make for strong leadership.

Stewardship. Service is central to the work of a servant leader and that includes being a steward for the organization so that it may contribute to the greater good of society and make a positive impact (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2007). Servant leaders consider the good at all times, including potential impacts on individuals, families, communities and the natural world from decisions made within the organization (Greenleaf, 2003). Teacher leaders demonstrate stewardship by advocating for their colleagues as well as student learning and the profession (Muijs & Harris, 2006; Supovitz, 2018; Teacher Leader Exploratory Consortium, 2011). They also are stewards through their active participation in school improvement initiatives and teacher professional development (Muijs & Harris, 2006).

Commitment to Growth. This characteristic of servant leadership is the commitment to the growth of individuals. This relates to Greenleaf’s “best test” as a leader and is a focus for servant leadership: helping those whom you serve become more confident and capable (Greenleaf, 2003). This is often a direct focus for teacher leaders: promoting growth among colleagues. Teacher leaders report seeing their role as helping teachers become better teachers and doing this through collaboration (Supovitz, 2018). The primary concern of teacher leaders is to support professional learning in their schools through organizing learning communities, leading professional development programs and assisting teachers in their classrooms (Muijs & Harris, 2006; Margolis & Huggins, 2012). It is through this focus that they demonstrate a commitment to the growth of others.

Community Building. Servant leaders find ways to build community and strengthen relationships (Greenleaf, 2003). Teacher leaders build community when they work collaboratively and lead and develop professional learning opportunities. Teacher leaders

are able to deal with process and have effective group processing skills (Yarger & Lee, 1994), they establish social linkages and networks among peers and community (Acker-Hocevar & Touchton, 1999), and they facilitate communities of learning through organization-wide processes (Crowther, 2002). Teacher leadership often extends beyond the school. Teacher leaders strive to make connections to the community outside of the school through collaboration with families, communities, and colleagues. (York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, 2008).

Implications

There are clear links and similarities between servant leadership and teacher leadership represented in the literature when one applies the individual characteristics developed in detail by Spears (2010). These connections indicate a strong potential for integration of servant leadership and teacher leadership for the purpose of strengthening teacher leadership. Nonetheless, the two forms of leadership are quite different contextually: teacher leadership is relatively narrow and confined to the role of a teacher operating within a school system (although this description of leadership may be extrapolated to other similar roles), whereas servant leadership can be practiced anywhere and in any position. Servant leadership as a philosophy of leadership has the potential to inspire, guide and provide purpose to the role of teacher leaders. It is an overarching way of approaching leadership that has the potential to support the more specific context of the teacher leader. A teacher leader who is consciously practicing the qualities of servant leadership will not only strengthen their role by building onto the characteristics of successful leaders identified in this paper, but, will so with a new sense of purpose and guidance. Sipe and Frick (2009) look to Aristotle to explain how consciously and consistently making decisions and actions based on guiding principles strengthen our character. An awareness and

understanding of servant leadership principles by teacher leaders would potentially make a powerful synergy between role and philosophy. Therefore, our recommendations going forward are to integrate discussions and information on servant leadership in teacher leadership courses. This would include being part of university preparatory programs, graduate level programs, teacher workshops, or seminars with the goal of developing a curiosity and understanding of the practice and philosophy of servant leadership as it is linked to teacher leadership. Through these types of courses, participants would develop an identity as a leader and recognition of their actions as leadership.

The importance of developing and strengthening teacher leadership can be seen in the growing number of courses or programs in this field (Allen, 2018; Taylor, Goeke, Klein, Onore & Geist, 2011), including the development of the Teacher Leadership Model Standards (Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, 2011). Taylor et al. (2011) stress the importance of such programs to help develop teacher leadership specifically because teacher leaders often do not associate themselves as leaders, nor associate their actions as providing leadership: "without the recognition that one is already a leader, the fulfillment of one's own potential and the capacity to influence others is diminished" (p. 925). These programs develop understanding of leadership theory, which in turn helps teacher leaders to develop their identity as leaders.

The philosophy of servant leadership has the potential for teacher leaders to become self aware of their identity as leaders. As stated earlier, teacher leaders are often reluctant to identify as leaders. Lieberman and Friedrich (2010) assert that this reluctance is due to the widely held definition of leader as being hierarchical, decision-making, and have a formal title. This definition stems from the system in which teachers exist where teachers are treated the same and it is the administration of schools that have more authority. Teacher leaders did not identify with that definition of leadership. Servant leadership provides a philosophy of leadership that is much more aligned

with teacher leadership (as evidenced through the comparison of characteristics stated earlier), it also challenges the traditional concept of leadership that teachers often do not identify with. Bennis and Goldsmith (1997) argue that by changing the lens with which we view leadership we can change ourselves as leaders. The concept of service-focused leadership is in direct opposition to, and challenges, the traditional, hierarchical concept of leadership (Crippen, 2005).

Our recommendation that servant leadership be included in teacher leadership programs as a valuable component to developing a teacher leader identity is further supported in that it not only provides an overarching philosophy to guide teacher leaders, but it strikes at the heart of being a teacher, of taking on the teacher identity and role. Sipe and Frick (2009) explain that the idea of servanthood can be thought of as a value and a belief and that individuals generally would like to be a part of an organization that makes a positive difference in the world. This is very true of teachers; most teachers go into the profession for primarily altruistic reasons (Fray & Gore, 2018). As Crippen (2005) points out, when one takes on the title or identity of teacher, they become a leader, first a leader in their classroom, then a leader in their school and beyond. With this role comes great responsibility, especially moral responsibility. She then expands this idea to assert that servant leadership provides a moral way of serving and addresses the moral imperative demanded of teachers and leadership in education (Crippen, 2010). For teacher leaders, the philosophy of servant leadership includes values that closely align with the profession and take it further. For example, Sun (2013) explains “leaders with a servant identity are able to consciously refer to a set of servant attributes when the situation requires servant behavior” (p. 555).

In an analysis of teacher leadership programs through the lens of the Teacher Leadership Model Standards, Berg, Carver, and Mangin (2014) observe that the standards do not include the importance of the teacher leaders developing a shared vision. They identify that this is an integral part of the role

of a teacher leader, especially when navigating instructional change and as such, is regularly included in administrative leadership programs and courses. Including a focus on servant leadership in teacher leadership programs could address this issue. Sun (2013) describes the visioning that servant leaders are associated with through the characteristic of persuasion. He points out that servant leaders need to develop a clear way forward to persuade followers to act. Sun also points out that servant leadership visioning is characterized by what would be best for the individuals in an organization, not the interests of the leader or the organization.

As stated previously, teacher leadership is associated with a distributed model of leadership. Mujis and Harris (2006) explain that teacher leadership thrives in environments that have a more distributed model of leadership where power is shared and where teacher leadership is valued, encouraged, and promoted. Similarly, Van Dierendonck (2011) found that an organization with a lower power distance (or a leadership model closer towards a distributed leadership model), not only facilitates servant leadership behaviours, but also encourages them. Therefore, we also recommend, not only incorporating servant leadership into teacher leadership programs, but include education on this partnership for school district administrations, emphasizing the importance of distributed leadership structures to promote and help to facilitate both teacher leadership and servant leadership within their districts.

Further research that is able to measure or track the effect of including servant leadership principals and characteristics in teacher leadership programs is warranted in this area as well. For example, Fields, Thompson, and Hawkins (2015) completed a study over the course of three years that documented the development of servant leadership in cohorts of students enrolled as social work and child and family studies majors. They incorporated servant leadership instruction into a weekly seminar session and analyzed students’ written reflections, capstone project (an internship), and a self-reflection using a conceptual framework. Student reflections from

their internship reflected “a deep, contextualized understanding of servant leadership within a professional setting” and based on the results, the team supported incorporating servant leadership instruction in programs for such professions (Fields et al, p. 101). We recommend embedding servant leadership and teacher leadership understandings and characteristics into teacher education programs and workshops to explore the effect of such programs over time. Tracking an increase or strengthening in teacher leadership is a complex endeavor; for example, looking for evidence of sense of identity as a leader in teacher participants and noting evidence of characteristics described in the Teacher Leader Model Standards (Teacher Leader Exploratory Consortium, 2011) or the ten characteristics outlined by Spears (2010) in the teacher participants’ schools. This could be done through reflective journaling before, during, and after attending a program; as well as interviews with teacher participants and their peers or administrators to investigate the long-term impacts.

Conclusion

Spears’ (2010) ten characteristics of servant leadership provided a framework for comparing the characteristics of teacher leaders and servant leaders as outlined in the literature. While there are many similarities between the characteristics of the two forms of leadership, there are also similarities around how they are defined and described. Neither teacher leadership nor servant leadership are dependent on a role or authority; both are described as a set of behaviours, a mindset or way of being as a leader. However, teacher leadership and servant leadership differ in that one is confined to a specific context while the other is a broader philosophy and practice. Connecting the two in meaningful and intentional ways in teacher leadership programs and workshops has the potential for creating a synergistic partnership. Servant leadership provides an overarching philosophy that could enhance teacher leadership programs and in turn strengthen the role of teacher leadership in our educational systems.

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