

Empowering Teacher Leaders for Instructional Improvement:
Using Peer Observation to Increase Teacher Leader Agency
As Instructional Leaders

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ABSTRACT

Fostering teacher leadership in a school or district can lead to greater professional growth, job satisfaction, and instructional improvement. With the transition to Common Core State Standards, this is a prime moment in education to grow teacher leader roles in order to support administrators in training and coaching all teachers in new practices. One form of teacher leadership is peer observation and peer coaching. This action research study examines how to increase teacher leader agency as instructional leaders at their school site through peer observation, so teacher leaders can support colleagues to apply what they are learning in professional development. The intervention included reciprocal peer observations cycles for two teacher leaders at different grade levels with a colleague on their grade level team, and a peer coaching session with two teacher leaders on the same grade level at different school sites. The intervention had a positive impact on all three teacher leaders who participated in the observation cycles by strengthening the connection between their grade level collaboration and PD content, and strengthening their relationships with colleagues. Results indicated that all participating teachers were supported to implement practices from the professional development through the peer observation process.

INTRODUCTION & CONTEXT

Teacher leadership is a key lever for growth and change at this moment in American public education. Schools and districts across the country are in a period of major transition, as many try to determine what teaching and learning will look like with implementation of the Common Core State Standards. The U.S. Department of Education has been developing a plan to envision a new teaching profession for the 21st century, called the RESPECT Project. As part of their vision for a more esteemed teaching profession that attracts highly qualified college graduates, the Department of Education states that “(w)e must create career and leadership opportunities that enable teachers to grow their roles and responsibilities without leaving the classroom... To transform the profession, we envision a school culture model built on shared responsibility and ongoing collaboration, rather than a top-down authoritarian style.” There was also a series of articles on teacher leadership published recently in *Educational Leadership*. In one of the articles, Roland Barth writes about his development of teacher as leaders over the years as a school administrator, naming reasons why this particular period in education seems ripe for teacher leadership: administrators are realizing they can’t do it all, the common core demands new curriculum to be written, and schools are open to new forms of teacher leadership.

So the time is right for us to develop teacher leadership in our school district. It is a small K-8 district in the San Francisco Bay Area, where we are shifting from the California State Standards to the Common Core State Standards, and a new approach to instruction and assessment. Our district serves a community in a pocket of poverty amongst the

wealth of Silicon Valley. Our students primarily come from low-income families, most of whom speak a language other than English at home. Over 90% of our students qualify for free or reduced lunch, approximately 80% of students are Latino, 10% are African American, and 10% are Pacific Islander or other.

Ten years ago, our school district was in the bottom 20 lowest performing districts in the state of California. As a result, the district was under heavy supervision by the state and county, who guided them to strictly implement a scripted English Language Arts program, Open Court Reading. Teachers were expected to follow the program with fidelity according to the district pacing guide. Those who wanted to incorporate other literacy instructional practices had to hide what they were doing, eventually left the district, or were fired. Over the years, as turnover decreased slightly, we retained more instruction-focused administrators, and teachers became familiar with the state test and state standards, our test scores have risen steadily. With more success on state accountability measures, our oversight by the county office has lessened, and we have had more agency to define our own values around quality instruction, and seek out instructional materials to supplement our scripted curriculum.

With the transition to Common Core standards and a new emphasis on deep reading comprehension, strong writing skills, and oral language development, the district has undertaken a transition from Open Court Reading to Balanced Literacy Practices. As the district Literacy Coordinator, I have led these changes over the past year and a half, bringing in staff development in reading and writing workshop, coaching teachers, and shifting district assessment practices. Many teachers have been excited by these changes, as they learn about a student-centered method of teaching that brings their own passions

about literacy into the classroom. However, many teachers are also very inexperienced with this complex method of teaching since they are emerging from a long period of Open Court-only instruction. Though our district is small, as the only literacy-focused person at the district level, I have struggled to adequately support teachers to make dramatic shifts in their classroom practice.

Consequently, I have strived to shift our district professional development practices as well. Our contracted district PD time is 1 hour and 40 minutes on Wednesday afternoons when students have early dismissal. In the past, this time has been spent in teacher meetings where the purpose and vision for teacher learning was unclear, or teachers gathered together in greatly varying groups to learn about a topic never or rarely revisited, with the process and reason it was chosen quite unclear. This year, the literacy PD plan was for teachers to participate in a yearlong PD sequence focused on the common core-aligned curriculum maps for teaching reading in consistent grade level cohorts.

I have been seeking ways to multiply my efforts in leading professional development and supporting teachers. I am leading an initiative to leverage teacher leadership to maintain the energy, planning, and support around balanced literacy and common core. I have developed a structure where lead teachers at each grade level from schools around the district meet frequently and voluntarily on a regular basis outside of their teaching day to plan our common core curriculum maps in reading and writing. A subset of these teachers also plans and delivers monthly district literacy PD for all teachers at their grade level. This structure benefits teachers in the district in multiple ways, in that teachers are able to receive PD in grade level cohorts from knowledgeable peers on strategies and content very relevant to their classroom practice, and teachers who are

interested in leadership roles are able to develop their leadership skills beyond their classrooms and support their colleagues. The teachers I work with are very invested in spreading best teaching practices throughout the district, in supporting other teachers at their grade level, and in their role as leaders. The effectiveness of our district literacy PD has improved since the beginning of the year, based on feedback forms collected at the end of each PD and reflections on their self-efficacy from the teacher leaders themselves.

Problem of Practice

The problem I am currently experiencing in my practice is that teacher leaders see themselves as once-a-month PD facilitators, but they do not see themselves as agents of change in directly influencing their colleagues' practice. The teacher leaders are becoming more effective at planning and facilitating PD, but they do not have the opportunity to have an ongoing impact on their colleagues' literacy teaching practice built in to their daily teaching schedule. We know that the key factor in student learning outcomes is quality of teacher practice, and that a key component of quality PD is classroom support in the form of coaching. My goal for the literacy lead team is to have the highest positive impact possible on classroom literacy practices district-wide. As the district literacy coordinator and leader of this team, I designed an intervention where I established a peer observation structure between teacher leaders and their site grade level colleagues. I evaluated whether this practice could empower teacher leaders to extend their impact on their colleagues' practice beyond the monthly PD, and whether teachers who participate in the observations could continue their professional learning as well.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

As schools and districts across the country transition to the Common Core State Standards, expectations for pace of change and attention to quality of teaching and learning are high. Schools that serve low-income, minority students have an even bigger challenge in their long-standing problem of attracting and retaining high quality teachers. In this period of change, and especially in these schools and districts, teacher leadership can be instrumental. The literature is replete with examples of how teacher leaders can play a key role in forming a positive culture in schools, supporting colleagues to improve their practice, and positively impact student learning. In this literature review, I examine teacher turnover in urban schools, examples and effects of teacher leadership in schools, and peer coaching as one form of teacher leadership. I argue that with the right circumstances, creating opportunities for teachers to lead can both make the professional experience more meaningful for these teachers, and support colleagues to raise the quality of instruction school-wide. Peer observation and coaching is one form of teacher leadership that can have a positive impact on improving instruction school-wide and providing supports to many teachers.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention in Urban Schools

It is no secret that teacher recruitment and retention have long been a challenge in our nation's urban schools. Defining urban schools as those that receive Title 1 funds, have a majority of students living in poverty, and usually serve minority students, Jacob (2007) confirms that urban teachers are often less qualified than their suburban counterparts in

characteristics, such as credentials, experience, and educational background. In multiple studies, various authors explain the reasons for difficulty of urban districts to attract and retain quality teachers, including:

- low salaries as compared with other districts
- late hiring timelines that cause candidates to take positions elsewhere
- feelings of isolation or a lack of professional community
- lack of support from administrators
- little agency in decision-making
- challenging student discipline issues
- a flat profession with little opportunity for advancement

(Levin & Quinn, 2003; Minarik, Thornton & Perreault, 2003; Jacob, 2007; Borman & Dowling, 2008; Boggins & Diffenbaugh, 2013).

Teacher retention is an issue; the turnover of teachers in urban schools is not occurring at a natural rate (Borman & Dowling, 2008). We know that teacher quality has an impact on student learning (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Bryk, et al, 2010). Multiple authors emphasize that it is possible to address this challenge through changing policies and initiatives (Jacob, 2007; Borman & Dowling, 2008). Jacob (2007) asserts that working conditions have a larger effect on teacher retention than previously indicated in the literature. This is something that school leaders have agency to improve. Guarino, Santibañez, and Daley (2006) found that schools that did a better job retaining teachers had mentoring and induction programs, higher levels of administrative support, and a strong collegial professional community. Other studies confirm that strong community in a school positively influences teachers to stay: “Mentoring, coaching, team teaching, and orientation programs address the needs of new teachers, connect teachers to each other, and develop staff loyalty and satisfaction,” (Minarik, Thornton & Perreault, 2003). In

addition to building a strong professional community, school leaders can provide opportunities for professional growth and advancement; Jacob (2007) found that 20% of teachers surveyed said this would have influenced them to remain in their positions in urban schools. When school leaders “foster professional growth, risk-taking behaviors, active involvement in the education community, and increased autonomous behavior,” they can even influence teachers to take on leadership positions and have a more active role in leading the professional community (Minarik, Thornton & Perreault, 2003).

Teacher Leadership

There is a strong connection between the issue of teacher retention in urban schools and the role teacher leadership can play both in inspiring teachers to stay in their schools and in encouraging them to support their colleagues. The increasing demand for professional capacity and instructional programmatic changes with the transition to Common Core also means that schools will need to provide teachers more time for formal and informal training, opportunities to practice, coaching, and feedback (Schein, 2004). Providing coaching and more intensive support in addition to professional development sessions greatly increases the rate at which teachers implement new practices (Joyce and Showers, 2002). Goodwin (2013) suggests that teacher leaders can have a strong positive impact on instructional practices of their colleagues especially within a coaching framework. As Roland Barth asserts in his 2013 Educational Leadership article, “the time is ripe (again) for teacher leadership.” In this section of the literature review, I will define roles teacher leaders can play, and describe challenges to teacher leadership and

conditions for success, leading to an in-depth look at peer coaching as one high-leverage aspect of teacher leadership.

Defining Teacher Leadership & Impact on Student Learning Outcomes

In their 2004 meta-analysis of two decades of research on teacher leadership, York-Barr and Duke define teacher leadership as “the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement.” Using this definition, there are many roles that teacher leaders can take on, and areas within a school or district where teachers can and should have influence. Barth (2001) found many areas where teacher leadership and input can be useful:

- Choosing textbooks and instructional materials;
- Shaping the curriculum;
- Setting standards for student behavior;
- Deciding whether students are tracked into special classes;
- Designing staff development and in-service programs;
- Setting promotion and retention policies;
- Deciding school budgets;
- Evaluating teacher performance;
- Selecting new teachers and selecting new administrators

Firestone and Martinez (2007) studied teacher leadership in the context of district initiatives, and also found that teacher leaders could play a needed role in the distribution of curricular materials, monitoring the implementation of a curriculum, providing in-classroom support, and playing a role in the development of other teachers.

There are conflicting views in the literature on whether teacher leadership has a definitively positive impact on student learning. York-Barr and Duke (2004) found that

there was not much evidence for student effects of teacher leadership roles. Goodwin (2013) found few studies that really illustrated strong connections between student achievement data and teacher leadership, and Marks and Louis (1997) found that effects of teacher empowerment on teachers changing instructional practices were mixed; teacher empowerment was important but not sufficient for improving instructional practices. On the other hand, Barth (2001) cited a study of 1000 schools that showed that schools with increased teacher involvement in decision-making, teacher leadership roles, and professional community did have correlated higher levels of student achievement. Researchers concur that while student achievement data linked to teacher leadership is not always conclusive, there are strong correlations between schools that are organized around instruction, teacher leaders' increased knowledge that positively impacts their own instruction, and increased student learning (Marks & Louis, 1997; Barth, 2001; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Based on this assertion, York-Barr and Duke (2004) constructed the following conceptual framework for teacher leadership:

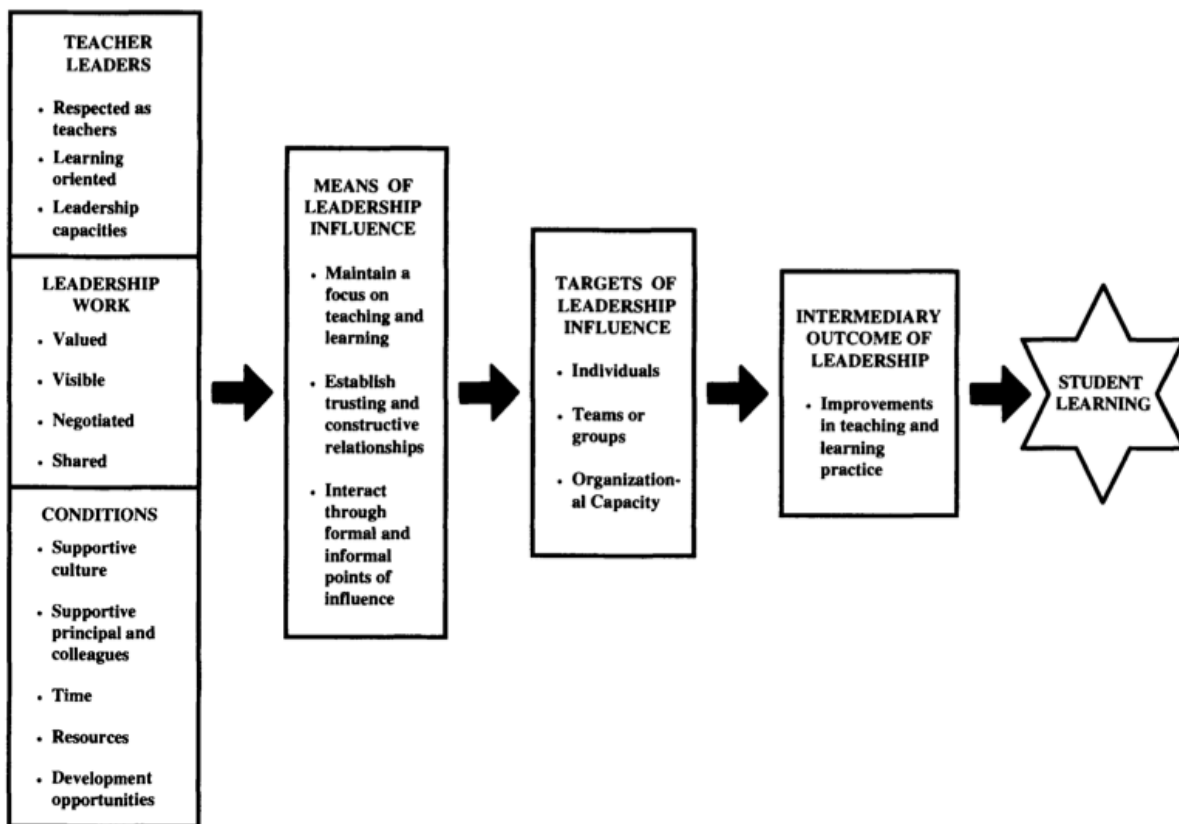


FIGURE 1. *Teacher leadership for student learning: Conceptual framework.*

This graphic illustrates how, when the situation is conducive to positive teacher leadership roles in schools and goals are focused on quality instruction, teacher leadership can lead to positive student learning outcomes.

Benefits of Teacher Leadership

There are many examples throughout the literature of the benefits of teacher leadership. As related to the critical topic of teacher retention, teacher leadership roles address the “flat” nature of the teaching profession. Boggins and Diffenbaugh (2013) explain that it is a problem to have a flat profession because new teachers are asked to take on more than their skill set can handle, and experienced teachers are not valued for their

skills. They assert that teachers want to positively impact the lives of others; this is why they entered the profession. So, we need to create opportunities for teachers to grow and have a broader impact while staying in the classroom.

Another area many researchers write about is how teacher leaders can augment the work of the increasingly busy and overworked principal. Education leaders have less and less content knowledge as they move away from the classroom role (Stein & Nelson, 2003). Based on Lee Shulman's work from 1986 on teacher pedagogical content knowledge, Stein and Nelson (2003) claim that educational leaders also need knowledge of the content teachers are teaching, pedagogy of how that content is learned and taught, and knowledge and skills around instructional leadership itself. Since it is unlikely that principals and other educational leaders can have the depth of knowledge of content and pedagogy of all subjects and grade levels, teacher leaders can fill in that knowledge and instructional leadership capacity. Principals also have increasingly more roles and duties today than ever before, and enlisting the support of teacher leadership can multiply their efforts as instructional leaders so they can reach more teachers (Barth, 2013; Bambrick-Santoyo, 2013).

As referenced earlier, the benefits to teacher leaders themselves were high, with teacher leaders reporting that they felt more agency in site decision-making, more opportunity for advancement would encourage them to stay at their school sites, and thinking through organization of instruction for other teachers increased their own awareness of how to organize and teach content (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). And finally, the impact of teacher leadership on other teachers also has the potential for positive change. Firestone and Martinez (2007) found that teacher leaders played a critical

mediating role between districts and teachers in the execution of district initiatives.

Participating teachers found that they had increased classroom support, more access to materials, and increased understanding of the district initiative as a result of working with teacher leaders at their school sites.

I will examine the impact of teacher leadership specifically with respect to the role of peer observation and coaching in a later section of the literature review.

Challenges of Teacher Leadership

While the benefits of encouraging teacher leadership in schools are numerous, studies have also found challenges to the success of teacher leadership initiatives. Time and structures were often cited as barriers to implementation (Barth, 2001 & 2013), and having thoughtfully planned structures for teacher leadership to occur are widely recognized as a needed condition for success in a teacher leadership initiative (West & Cameron, 2013). Another challenge to teacher leadership can be colleagues and the historically egalitarian nature of the teaching profession (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). If the culture of a school is not co-developed and fostered for the success of a teacher leadership initiative, teachers can react negatively to their colleagues holding an elevated position (Barth, 2001; Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010). Principals can be an additional barrier to the success of teacher leadership. They can prevent teacher leaders from positively impacting school sites if they do not employ effective uses of teacher leadership roles or do not create a culture where teacher leaders can be successful (Barth 2001).

Attributes of Effective Teacher Leaders & Conditions for Successful Teacher Leadership

Teacher leaders have a strong potential to influence their colleagues positively and participate in school-wide decision-making, but teacher leaders should be selected carefully. Researchers found that teacher leaders operate primarily on trust with colleagues; it is through this trust that they can form relationships and influence others (Firestone & Martinez, 2007; Goodwin, 2013). Teacher leaders also need to have expertise with classroom practice. We know that leaders need content knowledge (Stein & Nelson, 2003), and Lieberman and Friedrich (2010) found that teacher leaders gain respect from colleagues through the effectiveness of their own classroom practice.

Teacher leaders also need training. Richardson (2003) found that many teachers attend leadership programs that would allow them to become education leaders, but then do not change their role in the school. The teachers she surveyed reported that their leadership training gave them a new perspective on the larger context in which their leaders had to make decisions, and they would recommend similar leadership training to their colleagues. Other studies also found that training is necessary for teacher leaders, and the success of a teacher leadership initiative can be dependent on the training provided (York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Firestone & Martinez, 2007). Lieberman and Friedrich (2010) also point out that teacher leaders need their own communities of practice, where they can bring their experiences and challenges, and receive support from colleagues.

Teacher leaders also need systemic conditions to be conducive to their role in a school. York-Barr and Duke (2004) comprehensively summarize recommendations for effectively using teacher leadership as a resource for school improvement:

- Schools & districts must clearly articulate student learning & school improvement goals, and related priorities for development & action
- Resources (personnel, intellectual, material, fiscal) are then organized around these goals- including teacher leadership
- Generate ways teachers can lead efforts related to goal accomplishment (can change over time, can include modeling best practices in their classroom, mentoring others, planning & delivering PD, SSC, parent communication) → territory for distributed leadership should be mapped out
- Capacities & skills of individual teachers must be matched with various leadership functions (not every teacher leader would work as any teacher leader role)
- Conversations about the purpose of and expectations for varied leadership work
- Schools must identify supports that can advance the leadership work of teachers (restructuring time, identifying resources, etc.)
- Identify clear indicators of progress
- Regular opportunities to obtain feedback and to reflect on progress that is made toward goal accomplishment must be embedded in program planning

In conclusion, there are both potential challenges and benefits to teacher leadership.

Challenges include an egalitarian culture in teaching, time and structures, and principal effectiveness. On the other hand, there is also a high potential for opportunities for teacher leadership to positively impact the mindset of teacher leaders themselves, the instructional growth of colleagues, and the collaborative and growth-minded culture of a school or district.

One Aspect of Teacher Leadership: Peer Coaching & Observation

An often-cited version of teacher leadership is peer coaching. As mentioned above, when principals do not have enough time to observe instruction and give feedback to every teacher, teacher leaders can often support their responsibilities as instructional leader through the peer coaching role. Peer coaching is defined as “the assistance one peer provides to another in the development teaching skills, strategies, or techniques” (Strother, 1989). The terms “peer coaching” and “peer observation” are used somewhat

interchangeably through the literature. One way to define peer coaching is for one teacher to be coaching another towards something specific with the peer coach as the expert (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2013); another definition is an open discussion between colleagues for the purpose of instructional improvement, not someone “fixing” a problem (Strother, 1989). Authors do not always specify if teachers engaged in “peer observation” are also coaching each other, but they do mention a period that accompanies the observation where teachers discuss practice with each other. I will review literature that discusses both peer coaching and peer observation, since there is significant overlap between these two practices.

The literature cites many positive examples of the impact of peer coaching and observation, and explains what factors should be in place for a successful peer observation or coaching initiative.

Positive Impact of Peer Coaching & Observation

Coaching is an essential component to professional growth and learning of teachers, and a necessary condition for transformational change in an organization (Joyce & Showers, 2002; Schein, 2004). Joyce and Showers are often cited for their delineation of the five conditions for effective teacher training:

- 1) presentation of theory
- 2) modeling or demonstration
- 3) practice under simulated conditions
- 4) structured and open-ended feedback
- 5) coaching for application

Joyce and Showers assert that some teachers can benefit from training from the first four conditions, but many need coaching to truly transfer their professional learning to practice effectively and to tailor new learning to their students needs. In her 1986 study, Sparks compared three groups of teachers who all attended professional development workshops through the school year: one group that received no additional support, one group that had the opportunity for peer coaching, and one group that received coaching from the trainer. She found that the group that experienced peer observations had the highest rates of improvement in instruction, even above the group that received coaching from the person delivering the PD. She indicated that this could be because peer observation built ongoing relationships and higher morale for teachers who were able to engage in professional learning together, as opposed to those with no supplemental support in addition to PD sessions, and those who only had coaching from an outside observer. Indeed, Strother (1989) indicates that peer observation leads to more open dialogue between colleagues, and Little and Curry (2008) found that schools where teachers share with each other leads them to get more out of staff development. Peer coaching can also support teachers to make significant changes in their practice (Kohler, et al., 1997). In fact, there are many studies over the years that show positive impacts of peer coaching on participating teachers at the elementary, middle, and high school level, including helping the participants feel more fulfilled, building community and trust amongst colleagues, and therefore helping teachers feel less isolated (Sparks, 1986; Kohler, et al, 1997; Slater & Simmons, 2001; Murray, Ma, & Mazur, 2008; Jewett & MacPhee, 2012; Marchese, 2012).

Conditions for Peer Coaching to be Successful

The literature advises that certain conditions be in place for peer coaching or observation to have a positive impact on teachers. It must be non-judgmental and non-evaluative so that peers feel comfortable observing each other and giving and receiving feedback (Slater & Simmons, 2001). It must also center on the common development or refinement of shared practices (Becker, 2014), and teachers must stay focused on their instruction during conferences (Jewett & MacPhee, 2012). Peer coaches can also be provided training and their own professional community to grow in their role (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2013). Teachers also need time to observe each other and to debrief their observation experience (Slater & Simmons, 2001), and time needed and distance between schools can be a challenge if teachers need to travel to observe each other (Murray, Ma, & Mazur, 2008).

Researchers recommend the use of protocols to structure the pre- and post-observation conference that teachers have during peer observation or coaching. In a study of protocol-based conversations with teachers, Little & Curry (2008) found that protocols used in professional settings amongst colleagues can lead to new professional insights because of structured conversations. They found that the structure of the protocol helped focus the participants on the evidence at hand. The National School Reform Faculty (2012), which offers training to teachers to become Critical Friends Group facilitators, offers many resources for teachers to use protocols in structures conversations for the purpose of professional learning. They state:

“Protocols are structured processes or guidelines to promote meaningful and efficient communication, problem solving, and learning. By using them within a group who share common values, they’re great vehicles for building the skills and

culture needed for successful collaboration. Protocols permit an honest, deeply meaningful, and often intimate type of conversation which people are not in the habit of having.”

Many of the studies on peer coaching and observation describe a recommended structure for a pre- and post-observation conference, so a protocol for teacher participation could be one way to achieve that structured conversation.

Conclusion

The literature indicates that there is a great promise for improved teacher fulfillment and instruction via teacher leadership. There are many benefits to effectively supporting teachers to be instructional leaders in a school or district in a way that, with conducive conditions, will lead to instructional improvement and academic outcomes for students. A few of the factors leading to teacher turnover, which especially plagues low-income, urban school districts, include feelings of isolation, a lack of support, and having a flat profession with little opportunity for professional growth. One way that teacher leadership can be applied to address these negative experiences is through peer observation and coaching. When engaged in peer observation or peer coaching, teachers build trust and community, gain collaboration skills, and have a continuous focus on improving their practice. Accordingly, teacher leadership can be leveraged to drive instructional improvement, particularly when teacher leaders participate in peer coaching or observation.