Instructional Technology Specialist—Visionary, Teacher, and Servant Leader

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Descriptors: School Technology Specialist, Teacher-Leader, Servant-Leader, Internships

Abstract

The school technology specialist and media coordinator are sometimes perceived as support personnel without the status of instructional leader in the school. By applying common characteristics for the teacher leader, servant leader, and the job functions of school technology specialists, there is opportunity to transform the image from support personnel to instructional leader and change agent. One strategy examined for this study was the integration of community service projects embedded in internship projects for master of education students. Interns were able to apply their expertise as instructional technology specialists while serving students, teachers, and the community through special service projects uniquely designed for their region of the state.

Teacher Leaders.

Current research in K12 education reports an increasing emphasis on the importance of teachers as leaders in their school. Recent reports expand the role of school leader to include community leader as well. Trae Stewart (2012) brings to our attention the importance of teachers as transformational leaders who influence students, parents, and their peers. A good leader might be called upon to “model meaning in life” (Stewart, p. 233). Leaders impact school policy, design of curriculum, and climate in the classroom. Harrison and Killion suggest that characteristics of teachers as leaders are situational and can vary based on setting and community. Leadership opportunities might occur in one or more situations in a school—resource providers, instructional or curriculum specialist, classroom supporter, learning facilitator, mentor, school-wide leader, data coach, catalyst for change, and learner.

One of the most important areas for leadership is the potential for creating vision and guiding others in professional growth (Daft, 2005). Learning Forward, the Professional Learning Association serves as an advocate for strong teacher-leaders in K12 schools. The mission of Learning Forward is to provide professional development for practitioners as well as report current research in best practices for leadership and professional learning in schools. Standards for Professional Learning have strong emphasis on leadership. “Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires skillful leaders who develop capacity, advocate, and create support systems for professional learning”, (Learningforward.org, online).

Technology Specialists as Leaders.

Teachers identified as professional development leaders or instructional technology specialists have opportunity to become visionary leaders (Crippen, 2005; Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007). Collaborators in the International Society for Technology in Education have developed standards for “Advanced Digital Age Coaching” (ISTE, 2012). Standards for leaders were most recently developed and added to the original NETS standards for students and teachers. The first heading, Visionary Leadership, includes four areas of competency, all of which could be used to guide, mentor, and coach other teachers as they grow professionally, especially in the use of digital resources. Association for Educational Communication & Technology professional standards for programs in school library media and educational technology specialist programs promote leadership skills through Standard 4. Candidates in a media or technology program of studies must, “Demonstrate leadership attributes with individuals and groups…” (Earle & Persichitte, 2000, p. 26). The technology specialists is in an ideal setting for providing vision, guiding, mentoring, and promoting professional growth for teachers. However, many technology specialists experience negative responses from teachers when seeking collaborative projects. Others report frustration when enticing teachers to attend and engage in professional development experiences. Could the characteristics of a servant leader provide a solution for these concerns?
Servant Leaders.

The term “servant leader” became known through the work of entrepreneur Robert Greenleaf (1977, 2002). According to Greenleaf, a servant leader has impact on an organization through thoughtful guidance designed to promote the welfare of employees and other administrative personnel. Greenleaf admitted the term servant leader is an oxymoron but brought the two contradictory terms together as a strategy for changing conceptions of organizational structure. Based on personal experience in corporate world, and anecdotal evidence, Greenleaf believed the best way to bring about change is by modeling leadership through service to others. Larry Spears followed the work of Greenleaf using a more scholarly approach. Spears proposed ten characteristics of a servant leader (Spears, 1998, 2010). An effective leader should demonstrate skills in listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to growth in people, and building community. Using these characteristics, many schools and teachers are becoming advocates for community service (PSEA, 2012; Colby, Bercaw, Clark, & Galiardi, 2009).

Leadership Through Internship Experiences.

Professional programs typically include an internship or practicum. The purpose is to provide practical experiences within monitored safe environments. Interns are able to apply theory to best practice without the pressure of actual on-the-job risks. Darling-Hammond (2007) and her colleagues have reported case studies in the area of leadership, primarily in K12 settings. Based on her findings, one could expect experiential learning and simulations to provide the best programs for teaching leadership skills. Internships make good use of the workplace as a site for leadership planning that enable candidates to apply leadership knowledge and skills under the guidance of an expert practitioner. A well-planned internship experience will include opportunities to apply theory to best practice with regard to the profession but also through opportunities for leadership.

Finding Common Characteristics.

A review of the literature was used to identify and analyze attributes for various characteristics associated with leadership. Harrison and Killion (2012) describe the following as characteristics of a teacher-leader.

Teacher-Leader Characteristics.

- Resource Provider. Teachers who help their colleagues by sharing resources are leaders through positive impact resulting from a collegial attitude in the workplace. Shared resources might include books, teaching aides, websites, and instructional software.
- Instructional or Curriculum Specialist. Teachers who help their colleagues implement effective teaching strategies will be looked to as instructional leaders and will often become the go-to person in a school. Teachers who have deep understanding in how curriculum can be planned to support assessment and student learning outcomes will gain reputation as an important leader in their school.
- Classroom Supporter. Harrison and Killion describe this person as one who helps other teachers implement new ideas through coaching, modeling, and demonstration.
- Learning Facilitator. This teacher shows leadership skills through planning of professional development and growth for others. They often serve or lead committees related to staff development and curriculum reform.
- Mentor. This teacher comes alongside others who are novices or need the support of another professional.
- School Leader. This teacher has keen interest in serving and leading committees to bring about change or improvements in the school.
- Data Coach. This teacher is a visionary who can transform data into best practices in teaching and instructional methods.
- Learner. Harrison and Killion consider this an important attribute. Leaders must adopt the value of life-long learner.

Servant Leader Characteristics.

According to Spears (2010), the following ten characteristics are found in servant leaders. Compare these characteristics with those listed above for teacher-leader. Listening. A servant leader has mastered the skill for listening to provide appropriate and useful feedback to a peer or employee.

- Empathy. Provides appropriate concern and understanding in the needs and unique value of others.
- Healing. This characteristic is associated with promoting restoration of relationships in the workplace.
• Awareness. Having knowledge and understanding in the ethics, power, and values of the environment.
• Persuasion. The servant leader has special wisdom in persuading others to strive for goals that meet the greater good.
• Conceptualization or Foresight. This person is able to reflect and self-assess his or her own strengths, abilities and apply these to a vision for the greater good.
• Stewardship. The servant leader is able to apply the use of resources in appropriate and timely ways.
• Commitment to the Growth of People. According to Spears, this is one of the key attributes of a servant leader. The professional growth and well-being of others is paramount in his or her leadership style.
• Building Community. The value of shared ideas, responsibilities, and goals remains in the forefront of his or her leadership activities.

Research Questions

North Carolina schools value the contributions of technology facilitators as integration specialists, staff developers, and peer coaches. The position of technology coordinator, requiring advanced school licensure, or technology facilitation (special endorsement required) is typically filled with experienced teachers who have a proven track record as leaders and teachers in their schools. Most schools rely on the technology facilitator to serve as staff development liaison between central administrative offices and the building level administrators. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction has a published job description for these positions. (See http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/work4ncschools/employment/job descrip/techfacilitatorjob.pdf) Main functions are listed within three categories, one of which includes leadership responsibilities for working with teachers, administrators, and in the area of teachers' professional development. A close analysis of the job functions for the technology facilitator, classroom teacher, and servant leader indicates there is overlap and commonalities across the three sets of standards. Because of the high valued placed on teacher-leaders and because the technology specialist is in a natural position to serve as leader, the author of this paper asked, how can candidates for the Master of Education in Instructional Technology with school licensure gain experiences as servant leaders and teacher leaders in their schools? Could a technology specialist apply his or her expertise in use of digital resources through service projects and partnerships between school and community? What impact would these projects have on the development of characteristics for servant teacher leadership in the school? Would the characteristics of servant leader have positive effect on future collaboration between technology specialist and teacher, and between schools and the community?

Methodology

Candidates in the MAEd in Instructional Technology must complete 110 hours internship in a school setting. Because the degree is 100% distance delivered, interns are located across the state in more than 100 different school systems. Regions within the state are mountainous, seacoast, urban, and rural. Because of the diversity of our students, internship proposals are as varied as the cultural characteristics and environment of our students. Over three semesters, qualitative and quantitative data was collected during the graduate course EDTC 6992 Internship Seminar. Students in the internship were assigned a community service project to be included in their internship proposal. The interns were to form a partnership with teachers in their school or a collaborative project between the school and a community agency. The interns were assigned readings on servant leadership and teacher leadership characteristics. Based on the attributes of servant leader, interns explored possible projects in their school and/or community. The project proposal was submitted using a logic model format listing resources, objectives, proposed artifacts, photos, and documents, and description of short-term and long-term outcomes. At the end of the term, interns submitted a formal report with a completed logic model. Artifacts and evidences were aligned with original objectives. Reflections were submitted with how well the project achieved proposed outcomes. Interns were also asked to participate in an IRB approved survey with questions about the experience, usefulness for their job as technology facilitator, and impact on their role as a leader in their school. Using Qualtrics software, the survey was developed by the researcher reflecting the ten teacher leader characteristics proposed by Harrison and Killion and the ten servant leader characteristics proposed by Larry Spears. Results of the survey were analyzed using Excel to determine mean scores as interns reported satisfaction with various leadership, instructional, and service projects included in the internship. The final projects were designed to include photos, descriptive reports, timelines, and reflections on the community service project. Two areas of emphasis were required for the report: 1) how servant-
teacher leader characteristics were applied to the internship, and 2) how skills and concepts in instructional technology were applied to the internship.

Results

Analyses of characteristics for the teacher leader compared with servant leader showed alignment in several areas.

Table 1. Comparison of servant-leader and teacher-leader characteristics in K12 environments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Servant Leader</th>
<th>Teacher leader</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>Mentor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>Classroom Supporter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healing</td>
<td>---not identified in Harrison and Killion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>Catalyst for Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuasion</td>
<td>Instructional specialist and resource provider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptualization and Foresight</td>
<td>School Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stewardship</td>
<td>Resource person and Data Coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to the Growth of people</td>
<td>Learning Facilitator and Resource provider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Community</td>
<td>Curriculum specialist, School Leader, and Learner</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Reflections and discussion threads archived from course materials were analyzed for themes related to leadership characteristics. The table below provides selected comments from the intern as she reflects on experiences that match characteristics of servant leaders, teacher leaders, and technology facilitator job description.

Table 2. Reflections on teacher leader characteristics during technology internships in K12 schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Leader:</th>
<th>Servant Leader:</th>
<th>School Technology Leader Function:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resource Provider/data coach</td>
<td>Stewardship</td>
<td>Evaluate and select digital tools and resources-best practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Teachers should ALWAYS be researching new strategies and methods for teaching their students.”</td>
<td>“I helped teachers with district benchmarks now delivered online. This helped reduced stress [in the school].”</td>
<td>“Make sure I stay abreast…teachers turn to me.”</td>
</tr>
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Teacher Leader: Mentor; Learning Facilitator

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Servant Leader:</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Persuasion; Building Community</td>
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</table>

“Help by creating templates for vocabulary and technology related problem –based learning such as webquests.”

“I begin by using the new resource myself and show teachers how it is beneficial. I ask teachers to show how they are using new resources and how they ‘worked the bugs’ out.”

In addition to submitting reflections on internship their experiences, students were asked to respond to an online survey with questions related to leadership experiences. Results of the survey administered at the conclusion of the internship showed that interns value several of the characteristics associated with servant leadership. Using a sliding scale (0 to 100) the interns rated the value of certain activities typically occurring during an internship. In Figure 1, see questions and ratings provided by interns during spring 2012 (N=24).
Figure 1. Results of survey indicating the value interns place on activities representative of servant-leader characteristics.

Items in the survey were reflective of qualities identified in servant leaders. The highest scores showed interns valued building communities, being involved in leadership decisions, helping people grow professionally, being good stewards of resources, exhibiting awareness of potential outcomes from decisions, engage in reflection and self-awareness, honesty/truthfulness and showing empathy to others.

Community Service and the Technology Facilitator.

The interns reported innovative projects designed to meet authentic needs in the community. The creative efforts at applying their expertise as technology specialists were clearly evident throughout the three cohorts used for this study. The following examples show how the interns applied empathy, a desire to enhance professional growth in others, listening skills, persuasive strategies for achieving goals, stewardship of resources, and a desire to build social and educational community.

I am going to put together a Technology Expo night directly after the October PTA meeting, where parents and the community will be invited to come out to our school to attend technology classes of their choice. Conduct videography and desktop publishing workshops to create a program for people who attend the special Veterans’ Day event. The Veterans’ Day Tribute will be for the community during the week of October 29 through November 6.

The school that I work at has partnered with the non-profit organization, Girls on the Run. The goal is to inspire young girls and teach them life skills through the process or training for and running a 5K race. With so many teachers serving as coaches, I saw a need for improved collaboration and communication methods. . .

Last year, one of the teachers applied for, and received, a grant to plant a seasonal vegetable garden for the students and community to plant, care for, and harvest. . . Since not every student and teacher can participate in the actual planting, upkeep, and harvesting, I have decided to work with the third grade teacher who wrote the grant to develop a Wiki page that students, families, and the community can access to learn about planting, caring, and harvesting a nutritional garden.
Create a Boy Scouts of America website for the eight Packs and seven Troops located within Richmond County. The homepage will be created to “advertise” scouting opportunities offered within our community. The website will display all Richmond County Troops and Packs, its members, and leaders. Contact information will be provided for those interested in joining.

Reading Rocks. Family Reading. Several activities are planned K-5 Parents and children. These include:
- Presentation video- This highlights student reading program and the importance of reading with your child.
- Book Scavenger Hunt Students are given a clue to a book to find then read with parent. Matching game
- Match book title with author cards. Take the Reading Challenge- Parents and students pledge to read 20 minutes or more together each day.

Family Science Night. Objectives: 1. build important skills: self-discipline, time management, project management, and written, verbal and visual communication skills; 2. to show the importance of patience and precision ; 3. to be able to give the children a setting to bond with each other and their families and to gain new friends.

One project was very well received in a military community in the eastern region of the state. The intern’s awareness of the needs of military families and empathy she experienced for children of deployed parents led to a vision for the following wiki: http://militaryfamilyresources.pbworks.com/

See figure 2 below with a screenshot of the student’s homepage. She used systematic methods for planning content and design of her wiki. She also conducted usability tests before making it available to parents. Feedback from teachers, parents, and military personnel were used to refine and perfect the content of her resources.

The student was able to apply a wide range of leadership skills as she interviewed teachers and students in her elementary school. She worked collaboratively with a military liaison to help with the design of her wiki. Response from school administrators was especially positive indicating a much needed morale boost during times of heavy military deployment. Her project is representative of service, leadership, and instructional technology.

Conclusions and Recommendations

There are many commonalities between the characteristics of a servant leader and a teacher leader in K12 settings. Internship reports also show alignment between professional standards for technology facilitators and their counterparts -- teacher-leaders. The technology specialist is in an ideal profession for serving teachers with both instructional and technology support. It would be even more important to establish one’s self as an instructional leader and catalyst for change in the school. Positive professional image and establishment of productive relationships within a learning community are two of the potential outcomes associated with a leadership style that applies Greenleaf’s servant leader attributes.
Community service sites seem to provide an excellent venue for servant leader internship experiences. The community sees the teacher as a positive role model for both students and adults in the school. The technology facilitator or other specialist has opportunity to demonstrate empathy and concern for colleagues, students, and their families. A positive caring image could lead to instructional projects that permit modeling of best practices in use of technology. Internships centered on community service provide authentic problem solving and positive personal experiences despite the pressure of academic demands. These must be well planned using systematic methods such as use of a logic model template. Careful planning, appropriate use of resources, and predictive timelines will ensure a positive experience for the intern while he or she gains new insights and skills as a leader in the school.

Bibliography


