



Asking the Right Questions

When teachers come together to answer tough questions about instruction in their schools, they take teacher leadership to the next level.

Casey Reason and Lisa Reason

Although teachers often view their leadership as a quasi-administrative endeavor, teacher leadership is about leading change from the classroom. Giving input on new administrative policies and helping the principal make key management decisions are important activities, but the most essential work in school doesn't take place in the principal's office.

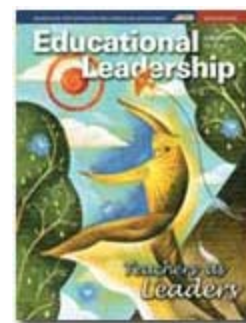
Teacher leaders need to bring the focus back into the classroom. One effective way to do this is through collaboration and inquiry: Teacher leadership teams should develop specific questions about teaching and learning in their schools and answer these questions as a group.

We have had the opportunity to study inquiry and teacher leadership firsthand through our work with the Galileo Teacher Leadership Consortium in Detroit, Michigan, and through teacher leadership training sessions that we have conducted in the United States and internationally. To focus teacher leadership and strategic inquiry on meaningful school improvement, schools can follow this five-step process.

Step 1: Identify the questions that are being asked and answered in your school.

When adults come together, they formulate questions. One hundred people on a plane develop a similar inquiry agenda during the course of the flight: Will the plane be on time? Will the airline lose our luggage? Will we be safe? Our history as a species has a lot to do with the fact that, generation after generation, human beings have asked and answered important questions related to their survival and life experiences within their tribes and communities.

All schools have an inquiry agenda, whether they are aware of it or not. When that agenda is filled with issues that teachers are powerless to change, teachers are less effective in their work and experience higher levels of frustration. For example, as consultants in teacher leadership, we worked with a group of teachers in a small high school in rural Auckland, New Zealand. Reluctant to talk about student achievement, the teachers focused most of their energy on their dissatisfaction with the administration. Instead of asking such questions as, How can we develop leadership capacity in our students? the teachers were asking, What's wrong with our principal? Given the energy they put into their quest, they had become adroit at identifying the administration's shortcomings. Not surprisingly, this school had gone through four principals in 10 years. During that time, the staff had never asked, What does the principal need from us to be successful?



September 2007

We found quite a different situation while working with a staff of almost 200 teachers at Rangitoto College, a large and successful public school in Auckland serving students ages 13–19. There, teachers were looking for students to adopt the “Rangi-way,” which was their way of saying that administrators, teachers, and parents endorsed the same high set of standards.

Teachers were clear about the questions their work was designed to answer. Specific questions included, How can we help our students lead with vision and integrity? and How can we help each student discover and explore his or her gifts? Teachers were specific about developing creativity, leadership, and scholarly attributes within the hearts and minds of the students they served. Moreover, they used their inquiry statements in conjunction with school improvement planning.

Teachers don't realize just how powerful they are in establishing the organizational culture in a school. Teams of teachers often work together for decades. They develop powerful and sophisticated social networks that have great potential influence in the school district. When a new principal comes in, his or her success is driven by these social networks' relative acceptance of the new agenda. This is why formalizing teacher leadership is so important to the future of the teaching profession: The more aware teachers become of their capacity to drive change, the more likely it is that deep change will occur.

Teacher leaders should close the doors one afternoon and have an honest discussion with one another about the questions that are being asked and answered in their building. In one school in which we worked, most of the bulletin board space in the faculty lounge was taken up with “Thank God It's Friday!” announcements or countdowns to holidays or retirement. The teachers realized that the implied question they were consistently asking was, How soon will it be over? Another teacher admitted that most of the conversations in the building revolved around the question, What's wrong with these kids and their parents?

Effective teacher leaders don't spend time in inquiry pursuits over which they have no control. In high-performing schools, teacher leaders ask empowering questions that they can help answer. Asking, How can we help parents in the community see how important it is for all students to graduate from high school? sets up a goal that teachers can influence.

Step 2: Choose strategic inquiry pursuits that directly relate to teaching and learning.

High-performing schools narrow their list of pursuits and focus on areas that have the most potential for improving student learning. For example, improving cursive writing in the elementary grades may be an important goal, but it may be less essential than other priorities in language arts. Strong teams of teacher leaders should look at student needs and decide which pursuits will have a deep and meaningful effect. Sacred cows may wind up on the endangered species list in favor of more essential pursuits.

Teacher leadership teams should begin by developing broad inquiry topics rather than specific questions. The staff in one New Zealand school developed the following inquiry focal points: (1) learn to work together as a staff, (2) make a better connection with the community, (3) improve student achievement in math and language arts, and (4) resolve conflict among departments. The teachers knew they needed to grow in these areas and believed that these focal points would help them improve student achievement.

Having established the initial focal points, teacher leaders should then write several short, powerful questions. For example, one high school math department asked, How can we improve the transition from 8th to 9th grade math? The teachers were frustrated because the district hadn't done anything to resolve this problem. They decided to call their own meeting; all secondary math teachers came together to address the problem. They realized they needed

to do some curriculum mapping to identify the gaps in students' skills as they entered 9th grade. They also decided to conduct a formal transition for 8th grade students. Students would go to high school one day in the spring to begin to familiarize themselves with the new 9th grade expectations. What was most powerful about the teachers' inquiry pursuit, however, was their ownership of the process. Eventually, the central office came around and provided some help. The result was a smoother transition in math. The teachers felt empowered.

In one Auckland school, teachers asked, How can we improve our capacity to learn together? They realized that much of the resentment that teachers experienced on the job resulted from lack of understanding among departments. Each department had found safety in "island-making." When schoolwide issues came up, teachers were suddenly forced to work outside their comfort zones. So the teachers lobbied their principal for additional collaboration time.

Another school, discouraged by students' disinterest in science, decided to make science more engaging. The school sent several teachers to science workshops to bring back ideas that would breathe life into their instructional strategies. It added this item to each departmental meeting for an entire year. Each month, teachers brought lessons that worked to the group. They realized that they could achieve both rigor *and* engagement in science because the department now sought both outcomes.

Teachers can layer questions with more than one inquiry outcome. For example, math teachers may have the goal of improving students' transition from 8th to 9th grade math. They may also have the goal of learning to work together more effectively as a department. To that end, they may ask, How can we improve students' transition from 8th to 9th grade math *while* improving our ability to learn and grow as a department? Succeeding in this inquiry suddenly takes on a new dimension. There is more emotion behind the question, and the department has twice the chance for success. The two outcomes interrelate because improvement in one depends on improvement in the other.

And by working together, the teachers slay the old dragon—blaming one another for failing students. Instead, by getting focused and specific, the team becomes strategic in its inquiry pursuits.

The school in rural Auckland where staff wanted to do a better job of working together decided to implement professional learning communities and is progressing quite enthusiastically. In the name of making better connections with the community, teachers set up ongoing parent dialogues at times convenient for the region's working families. Teachers sought to improve student achievement in math and language arts by developing common assessments and collaborative grading practices.

How many questions should a team identify? The fewer the better. Of course, the longer a team of teacher leaders works together, the better it becomes at managing multiple inquiry pursuits.

Step 3: Identify the emotional relevance of each inquiry topic.

One of the most important findings in brain research is that emotion is a driving force behind learning (LeDoux, 1996). If we don't see emotional relevance in what we experience, we often don't allow that information to sink in. For example, a yellow car drives by; your brain acknowledges the experience and then lets the memory go. But if that yellow car is being driven by a long-lost relative you've been searching for for years, you will suddenly experience an emotional connection. You will vividly recall both the car and the driver.

Given the importance of emotion to the learning process, we can improve our inquiry statements by establishing their emotional genesis. A team of teacher leaders should ask such

questions as, Why is this inquiry topic important? What does making progress in this area mean to us? What does it mean for our students and community?

Teachers in the school in rural Auckland said that learning to work together was important because they knew that, by collaborating, they could better serve their students and get more enjoyment from their work. Making a better connection with the community would help them become more emotionally connected to students and their families and more understanding of the challenges they faced in the community. They believed that improving student achievement in math and language arts was essential to ensure that all students had a chance at a prosperous economic future. Finally, the teachers agreed that resolving conflict among departments was important because it would help them experience deeper levels of joy and fulfillment in their work and get the most out of the creative teacher leaders in the building. Suddenly, they went from having inquiry topics that surfaced out of habit—such as, What's wrong with the principal?—to having a handful of strategic focal points with defined emotional drivers. By defining the emotion, the teachers released both individual and collective passion for their pursuit.

Establishing the inquiry's emotional connection also enables teacher leaders to see beyond their limiting beliefs. For example, the most important inquiry for a team of teachers we worked with in Texas revolved around reducing the school's 40 percent dropout rate. The teachers realized that, by keeping students in school, they could influence an entire generation in terms of life experience and standard of living. Goals that contributed to student graduation—such as improving the math scores—suddenly had great emotional relevance.

As these teachers thought about their challenge, they knew that reducing the dropout rate from 40 percent to 20 percent would be an outstanding accomplishment. However, given the emotional content of the pursuit, team members began to ask aloud, Why should we let *any* of these students go? Given what was at stake, everyone decided to shoot for a 0 percent dropout rate.

To encourage big dreams and unleash creative energies, teams of teacher leaders can assign a team member the job of monitoring limiting beliefs. This involves making sure that every team member gets to respond and reflect and that no one discourages those who express big dreams. The monitor will need to watch out for subtle prompts like eye rolling, deep sighing, and other checking-out behaviors on the part of those who see challenges before opportunities. In addition, the monitor can ask, How can we do more? How can we make our outcome even more outstanding?

Teacher leaders have a deeply held conviction that it's possible to change the world. By meeting regularly and focusing on transforming teaching and learning, they begin to reap rewards. First, the team grows closer as a greater sense of community takes root within the school. Second, team members develop the courage and skill sets necessary to confront barriers and nurture a culture of success (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, & Hann, 2002). Teacher leaders come to hold high aspirations for themselves, their colleagues, their principal, and their students.

Step 4: Work as a team and take ownership of inquiry pursuits.

Considering the turnover at the board and administrative levels in most school districts, teachers are often the most consistent voice in schools year after year. This is why it is so important that teacher leaders not work in isolation. Creating a professional learning community encourages teams of teacher leaders to help one another grow and evolve as leaders and learners.

To bring teacher leadership and strategic organizational inquiry together in a meaningful way,

teachers must have time to consistently meet and collaborate within a community of learning. However, schools that haven't adopted these protocols shouldn't consider themselves unable to proceed. Indeed, teachers don't need permission from their principal to collaborate. In the absence of administrative support, they can bravely move forward and create their own opportunities for collaboration. They can collectively investigate how to more effectively serve their students, thus reducing their level of stress and improving student outcomes.

Teacher leaders need to find a way to work together, even if it means meeting before or after school from time to time. To accommodate time constraints and expand the opportunity for collaboration, several prominent teacher leaders in Northville, Michigan, launched an online forum last year for teachers in their district interested in this kind of connection. The forum enabled busy teachers to log on and converse with colleagues any time of the day or night. This strategy was helpful because it facilitated collaboration among teachers who worked in buildings at some distance from one another within this large school district.

Teacher leadership teams in schools are owners and investors in their school, not tenants (Barth, 1990). If there is a success at school, do the teachers own it? If there is a failure, do they own that as well? In some schools, success is barely noticed, and failures are assigned to the principal, superintendent, parents, and the board of education.

When we worked with a group of teachers in Florida, one teacher remarked, "I understand that our teacher leadership team needs to own the problems in our school. But what do we do about the principal? She publicly takes credit for everything." This teacher and her colleagues came to acknowledge that the only people who really own a school's success or failure, from an emotional point of view, are the teacher leaders who know the truth. Teacher leaders have a mission in their profession. Credit from the principal may or may not come during that journey. The deeply satisfying rewards come from working together and recognizing the influence of one's work, not only on student performance, but also on teachers' own collaborative learning.

Step 5: Take the inquiry public.

One of the most powerful ways to gain momentum in responding to an inquiry statement is to find others who support that outcome. Teacher leaders should ask themselves, *Who else is devoted to responding to this inquiry? Which community or civic groups are concerned about this outcome? What are parents doing about this issue? Have any politicians adopted this issue in their platforms? Are any local, state, or national groups already working on this issue?* Highly effective teacher leaders have the capacity to create networks far beyond their classroom in support of their cause. Chances are, most inquiry pursuits are also important to other members of the community. Getting that support is likely to improve the opportunity for meaningful growth.

Perhaps the best example we've seen of a teacher leader taking her inquiry public is that of Khris Nedam, a 3rd grade teacher at Amerman Elementary School in Northville, Michigan. For almost 10 years, Khris has been on a mission to lead change and innovation. She asked, *How can we bring both learning and medical support to a group of needy children?*

Her quest has led to the construction of a six-room schoolhouse, with 16 teachers serving 650 students who otherwise might not have received an education. Because nutrition and medical care were also in question, a clinic and kitchen were constructed as well. What makes Khris's efforts so special is the fact that this school, kitchen, and clinic are located in the rural countryside of Afghanistan, about three hours southwest of Kabul.

Teacher leaders have the capacity to lead advances in social sustainability and quality of life for the community (Crowther et al., 2002). Khris is a teacher leader who has taken this capacity to

a much larger community. She networked with other passionate teacher leaders throughout the world and engaged them in her inquiry pursuit. She solicited numerous benefactors, communicated with national and international political leaders, and cut through miles of red tape. Once she took her mission public, she found support from people as close as Northville, Michigan, and as far away as Australia. Khris's profound inquiry topic resulted in deep levels of collaboration that will change the lives of a generation of children (see www.kids4afghankids.com).

The Possible Dream

Teacher leadership and strategic organizational inquiry are deeply interconnected and interdependent. Without passionate inquiry, teacher leaders will not push to the outer limits of their capabilities. Without an emotionally relevant quest, they are unlikely to embark on those deeply fulfilling journeys in service. Schools that identify a meaningful quest are much more likely to make substantial progress under the guidance of empowered teacher leaders who believe that anything is possible.

References

Barth, R. (1990). *Improving school from within*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Crowther, F., Kaagan, S., Ferguson, M., & Hann, L. (2002). *Developing teacher leaders*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

LeDoux, J. (1996). *The emotional brain*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Casey Reason (caseyreason@gmail.com) and **Lisa Reason** (lisa.reason@gmail.com) are consultants regarding change and leadership of learning organizations.

Copyright © 2007 by ASCD

[Contact Us](#) | [Copyright Information](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#)

© 2009 ASCD