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Theodore J. Kowalski

*University of Dayton*, tkowalski1@udayton.edu

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# 10 Preparing Teachers to Be Leaders: Barriers in the Workplace

Theodore J. Kowalski

Theodore J. Kowalski is Professor of Educational Leadership at Ball State University. He is the author of numerous articles and ten books, the most recent of which is *Contemporary School Administration* (1993). His research interests include organizational behavior and teacher-administrator relationships.

## ABSTRACT

Efforts to prepare teachers to be leaders are often impeded by a number of barriers in society and schools. Obstacles in the workplace are largely products of organizational cultures and climates that place teachers in subordinate roles. The argument is made that consideration of these barriers must be incorporated into revisions of teacher education curricula.

Discussing reform efforts during the mid-1980s, Darling-Hammond (1988) observed that there were two very different streams of policy based on dissimilar ideas of teaching and learning. One led to the conclusion that schools needed better regulations and the other led to the conclusion that schools needed better teaching. After more than a decade of tinkering with strategies predicated largely on the notion that schools could be improved by simply requiring students and teachers to do more of what they were already doing, reformers are aiming their endeavors toward the structural

dimensions of schools. This change in course has created a window of opportunity described by Little (1993): "State and local policy makers seem most readily disposed to support appeals to professionalization where they see it as (a) sustaining a reasonably well-prepared and stable teacher work force, and (b) coupled with assurances of local accountability for student outcomes" (p. 132). In shifting from intensification mandates to school restructuring as a primary strategy, reformers have given teacher educators an opportunity to shape a new generation of teacher leaders—practitioners who will be empowered to make critical decisions about the process and ends of education.

Unfortunately, the road to true professionalism is strewn with countless obstructions, many of which fall outside the domains of preservice and inservice education. Some have a social foundation and are the products of long-standing public perceptions. Americans, for example, have not bestowed on elementary and secondary school teachers the same status and respect accorded to practitioners in better recognized professions (e.g., physicians, architects). Others obstructions have an institutional base. Institutional obstructions, deeply rooted in the character and traditions of public education, are subtle and not readily recognized by either educators or the general public. Perhaps most important, social and institutional obstructions are not mutually exclusive; over time, they have fused to create an intricate set of requirements and expectations for teachers.

The objective here is to unravel those barriers to teacher professionalism that are primarily ingrained in the organizational structure of schools. Historically, these impedimenta have been largely ignored by teacher education programs (Barr, 1987) even though they are sufficiently powerful to abort any change effort that emanates from the university campus. The discussion of institutional barriers is preceded by brief reviews of the organizational dimension of schools and teacher socialization.

### Schools as Social Organizations

Although organizations come in many forms and possess varying purposes, all are social units deliberately designed to achieve specific goals (Reitz, 1987). They are entities that develop distinctive cultures—values, belief systems, and norms that serve to direct the behavior of groups and individuals within them (Owens, 1991). In schools, such normative structures help teachers interpret everyday occurrences and

sort out confusion, uncertainty, and ambiguity in their work life (Goens & Clover, 1991).

The value of understanding schools as social institutions is related to the fact that behavior in organizations is not random. Rather, there are fundamental consistencies influenced by a complex network of interactions among individuals and formal and informal groups within a cultural context (Robbins, 1986). In all social systems, workers and managers face sanctions designed to encourage their compliance with expected behavior. Teachers are no exception. Sanctions in schools may be imposed by the organization (e.g., by district or school administrators) or its subsystems (e.g., informal teacher groups); in both instances, sanctions constitute a potent mechanism for controlling teacher behavior. The degree to which teachers and administrators adhere to a common set of norms, beliefs, and values determines whether a school has a strong or weak culture.

Culture is but one characteristic of a school's total environment. There also are physical attributes (e.g., school building and equipment), organizational structures (e.g., calendars, schedules), social relationships (e.g., working relationships among teachers), and human elements (e.g., the needs, wants, and motivations of individuals who work in the school). Collectively, these characteristics constitute the school's climate—a comprehensive construct for understanding work-related behavior (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993).

Even though individual behavior is a mix of institutional expectations and individual personality (Owens, 1991), there are two realities suggesting that culture and climate are especially potent forces in determining the behavior of teachers. First, schools as institutions have proven to be tremendously resistant to change. Although minor alterations have occurred from time to time, the basic institutional framework of most public schools has remained intact. To a great extent, this inflexibility is produced by traditional expectations that public education function as an agency of stability rather than as a social force to beget change (i.e., schools ought to protect existing values and practices of the majority) (Spring, 1990).

Second, teacher role expectations across most school districts have remained rather fixed. Despite new instructional paradigms, technology, and recent reform initiatives, many teachers still work in isolation, implementing prescribed curricula with predetermined materials. Clearly, teachers enjoy some independence when their classroom doors are closed; however, basic institutional expectations continue to place them in subordinate roles. There is little evidence to date that school reform efforts have changed this condition. A recent study found that nearly 60% of the

teachers have yet to see any type of change in their individual schools (Harris & Wagner, 1993).

### Teacher Socialization

Studies on teacher socialization offer insights into the relationship between teacher behavior and work environment. Historically, teacher educators have largely accepted the notion that exposure to institutional characteristics are a most powerful determinant of actual teacher roles (e.g., Etheridge, 1988; Larkin, 1973; Rosenholtz, 1989). This fact is especially cogent when one considers that school cultures are often shaped by external forces and not by teachers and administrators. Cooper (1988) described how educators passively accept their roles in many schools:

School people have surely not prospered, or even benefited, from "received" culture and imposed wisdom. Yet school inhabitants have lived as though they were unsophisticated natives ministered to by well-meaning missionaries who exude paternalism. Practitioners have had their shortcomings and inadequacies catalogued and classified and, sadly, have come to accept the blueprint of their deficiencies as though they had drawn it themselves. They have become passive and dependent in pursuit of their own voices. (pp. 45-46)

In the last several years, the magnitude and strength of socialization have been challenged. Feiman-Nemser and Floden (1986), for example, asserted that recent studies raised questions as to whether "experienced teachers abide by a single set of norms, whether new teachers change significantly, and whether they are merely passive recipients of a teaching culture" (p. 520). Zeichner and Gore (1990) argued that functionalist studies (i.e., research that casts teachers as prisoners of either their pasts or their workplaces) failed to recognize (a) individual differences in teacher development by concentrating solely on descriptions of central tendencies and (b) that new teachers have the capacity to influence their work environments as well as being influenced by them. This latter observation is especially cogent to school restructuring.

Summaries of research on effective schools provide some evidence that the collective efforts of strong educators can produce work environments that are noticeably unique (e.g., Purkey & Smith, 1985). The most

effective schools typically have strong cultures oriented toward operational flexibility. Yet, most schools do not exhibit such characteristics, and as a result, most teachers still are routed into traditional roles.

Several observations may prove helpful to understanding the importance of socialization. First, the strength of socialization varies from school to school and is dependent on whether a school has a strong or weak culture. Second, socialization can be either positive or negative, but because most socialization has been associated with traditional roles, it generally is perceived as a negative influence (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986). Third, generalizations about socialization are made more difficult by the fact that much of the research on teacher socialization has focused more directly on professional socialization (e.g., the effects of teachers on each other, the effects of preservice education) than on organizational socialization (e.g., the effects of culture and climate on behavior)—and the two are clearly different.

### Institutional Barriers to Teachers as Leaders

Institutional barriers are defined as those change obstacles stemming from organizational attributes of schools and school systems. Identifying all would be virtually impossible; rather, the intention here is to provide a summary of the most pervasive ones. These obstacles are basically manifestations of the normative dimensions of classical organizational theory (bureaucracy), and they have evolved in public education over the last 100 years.

### *Expectations of Efficiency*

Underlying much of the criticism of elementary and secondary education is a perception that public education is not terribly efficient. Frequently, negative editorials point out that increased spending, especially in urban areas, has failed to yield improved outcomes. Concerns about public school productivity certainly are not new; demands for technical efficiency can be traced all the way back to the early development of urban school districts in the United States. Hierarchies of authority, divisions of labor, and reliance on rules and regulations reflect an industrial-management tradition that views organizations as essentially rational entities. The infusion of these values into public education nurtured the idea that institutional goals were more likely to be attained if workers were (a)

closely supervised and (b) restricted to their work roles without unduly interfering in organizational planning and decisions (Hanson, 1991).

There has always been a level of tension between support for organizational efficiency and the ideals of democracy (Strike, 1993). For example, many taxpayers simultaneously support shared decision making and fiscal constraints even though these two objectives are incongruous and their coexistence is likely to generate conflict. Owens (1991) wrote that two conditions are necessary for conflict—divergent views and the incompatibility of those views. If teachers participate in governance decisions, if they are given latitude to make independent judgments in areas of instruction and curriculum, what level of efficiency must be sacrificed? If forced to choose between efficiency, a goal that is essentially economic, and democratic governance, a goal that is essentially philosophical and political, which will policy makers select?

### *Expectations of Control*

Studies frequently show that teachers identify school culture as inhibiting their influence over their own practice (e.g., Wilson, 1993). In large measure, this complaint is related to excessive rules in most schools. The issue of control has three dimensions. The first is characterized by tensions between state legislatures and local school boards (state vs. local control); the second is characterized by tensions between school districts and individual schools (centralization vs. decentralization); and the third is characterized by tensions between administrators and teachers within a school (legitimate control vs. professionalism). Each contributes to the control mechanisms placed over teachers, and accordingly, each has some bearing on institutionalizing the concept of teacher leaders.

Contrary to popular opinion, organizational control does not stem solely from management-oriented administrators who refuse to share power. If this were true, the barrier of institutional control would be less complex. In reality, control over teacher behavior emanates from several conditions. Consider just three:

1. Legislatures and state departments of education frequently exercise control over public education in response to political pressures. They also do so because of state constitutional provisions.
2. School districts in the 1960s and 1970s drifted toward higher levels of centralization and control because of a growing compliance

orientation that made school board members and administrators wary of litigation and state-imposed sanctions (e.g., fear that the absence of control would result in employee noncompliance with new laws on discrimination) (Tyack, 1990).

3. Studies on site-based management have indicated that principals are concerned about sharing power and reducing control especially when school reform initiatives bring into question responsibilities in areas where they perceive themselves as having a low level of authority but a high level of responsibility (e.g., Kowalski, 1993; Lucas, Brown, & Markus, 1991).

Arguments in favor of teacher empowerment have frequently stressed the abilities of highly structured, centralized organizations by showing how tight controls prevent teachers from targeting their instruction to individual student needs. Clearly, this stance is defensible. But is it sufficiently convincing to reduce traditional control mechanisms imposed by the states, school districts, and administrators?

### *Teacher Autonomy and Decentralization*

Closely related to control is the issue of teacher autonomy. It is inconceivable that teachers can become leaders without gaining greater degrees of freedom in their work. Even though many possess partial autonomy, few possess it at a level that would be associated with practice in more established professions. Corwin and Borman (1988) wrote: "In the final analysis, teachers are subordinate employees of school districts subject to districtwide and schoolwide policies, rules, and procedures. Hence, their autonomy is never absolute but always subject to negotiation" (p. 220). Influenced by societal expectations, limited autonomy is associated with a perspective that teachers are primarily responsible for implementing the decisions of others.

It is not insignificant that the initial responses to school reform, immediately following the publishing of the report *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 (National Commission on Excellence in Education [NCEE], 1983), were predicated on assumptions that the problems of education involved incompetent teachers and lazy students. Only after it became clear that intensification mandates would not produce excellence did reformers begin to consider school restructuring—and they did so largely at the urging of leaders in the education profession. Given the fact that earlier

efforts to improve schools were essentially unsuccessful and arguments that education would be more effective if instructional decisions were decentralized, many political and business leaders moved to endorse initiatives calling for a new generation of U.S. schools. But does the advocacy of greater freedom for schools reflect a shift in public perceptions regarding teacher autonomy? Good and Brophy (1986) observed: "Ironically, many of those who argue most strongly for school autonomy are least interested in teacher autonomy" (p. 588). Sadly, there is little evidence that the advocacy of decentralization is associated with societal beliefs that teachers ought to have greater freedom in practicing their profession.

### *Teacher Autonomy and Unionism*

Through much of the 20th century, there have been normative conflicts between educators who see themselves as professionals and the bureaucratic organizations in which they work. The resulting friction was a primary factor in the growth of unionism in public education. Lieberman (1986) explained that teacher unionism was advanced by feelings of helplessness; Newman (1990) characterized it as a justifiable quest for autonomy. But even though teachers have gained a greater voice in some organizational decisions, it has come at the price of reduced autonomy for individual teachers (Corwin & Borman, 1988). Even today, many teachers remain ambivalent about union membership.

Arguments promoting the coexistence of unionism and professionalism are usually based on the conviction that national organizations for educators (such as the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers) can function much like the American Medical Association—that is, they can serve to protect the interests of their members and members' clients without jeopardizing the professional status of their members (Newman, 1990). Such analogies, nevertheless, fail to address the most essential question. If teachers become leaders, if they are treated as true professionals, why do they need the collective power of a union? Noteworthy in this respect are indications that national union leaders may be reconsidering their support for decentralization (e.g., site-based management) as a primary reform strategy (Bradley, 1992).

### *Acceptance of a Knowledge Base*

Strike (1993) argued that a knowledge base for the teaching profession would have to meet both social and epistemic tests before the public

would recognize its existence. In the absence of such evidence, legislators, parents, and others are unable to identify the "real professionals." Consider consequences visible in the governance and policy mechanisms directing public education. Not only are most policies developed by elected officials at the state (governor and legislatures) and local (school boards) levels, but they are typically produced with specificity, in abundance, and without the counsel or direction of professional educators. Particularly revealing has been the behavior of policy makers in times of perceived crisis. Following the Soviet success in launching Sputnik in the late 1950s, the federal government encouraged scientists in various disciplines to develop packaged instructional materials for elementary and secondary schools to ensure that the curriculum would be "teacherproof" (Schubert, 1986). Reactions after the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (NCEE, 1983) were quite similar. A recent national study of teachers, for example, found that a majority continue to see themselves as the targets of reform, and only 37% felt they were agents of reform (Harris & Wagner, 1993).

Because the public does not recognize a body of esoteric knowledge establishing teaching as a true profession, efforts to distinguish between competent and incompetent teachers are judged to be subjective and self-serving. An example is found in the skepticism being voiced about current efforts to create a national system of certification. There also is uncertainty as to whether teachers possess knowledge and skills that permit them to make decisions about the ends of education that will be equal or superior to those made by legislatures and school boards (Strike, 1993).

### *Role Definition*

There has always been a degree of incongruity between the role teachers believe they should perform and the role established for them by society and school officials. Further, teacher roles are not constant within or among schools. This variance makes it more difficult to precisely define what is meant by the term "teacher leaders." A study by Smylie and Denny (1990) discovered that teachers tend to define teacher leaders "primarily around functions of helping and supporting their colleagues to fulfill classroom responsibilities and improve their practice" (p. 252). Yet, results from their research exhibited that the work of teacher leaders was primarily at the school or school district levels (e.g., program development, collaboration with administrators). The difference was largely explained on the basis of time parameters—that is, teachers tended to assume only

those leadership functions not interfering with obligations expressed in their traditional teacher roles. These outcomes suggest that school structure and patterns of power, practice, and beliefs contribute to discrepancies between expected and actual roles.

The teacher's world of work is filled with ambiguity and conflicting goals (Griffin, 1985). Actual behavior is a combination of institutional role (work expectations defined by the school) and the personality of the role incumbent (Owens, 1991). Even if a uniform definition of teacher leader is accepted by both teacher educators and school administrators, individual differences in teacher beliefs, attitudes, needs, and motivations are likely to produce unique iterations of behavior. Until the concept of teacher leadership is defined sufficiently to account for societal, institutional, and individual dynamics, resistance to it is likely.

### *School and Community Relationships*

Several authors (e.g., Strike, 1993; Zeichner, 1991) have explored the institutional implications of interfacing teacher professionalism with the goal of maintaining a symbiotic relationship between public schools and their environments (communities). The most cogent question emerging from their work pertains to balancing the benefits of decentralization and teacher empowerment (e.g., individualized instruction) and the benefits of maintaining local control of public education (e.g., democratic ideal of citizen involvement and role in policy development).

In advocating new conceptualizations of reform within a democratic context, Strike (1993) contended that parents and students ought not to be treated as clients, but rather as partners. His notion of teacher autonomy in a democratic context was predicated on two assertions: (a) that increased autonomy would mean teachers becoming firsts among equals in discourse about education, and (b) that tensions between bureaucratic organizations and communities would most likely be reduced if local decision making replaced the view of democracy that vests sovereignty in state legislatures.

Zeichner (1991) argued that no reform plan or degree of teacher autonomy is sufficient to deal with the institutional and structural inequalities in our society that spawn educational problems. Accordingly, he too rejected the idea that democratic control of public education should be sacrificed for professionalism. Clearly, educators ought not to frame the challenge as one of choosing between professionalism and democracy,

but rather as one of refashioning organizational cultures and climates so the two may coexist.

### **Conclusion**

In discussing school reform efforts, Louis and King (1992) likened the responsibility to that of Sisyphus—a mythical Greek figure who faced the task of pushing a boulder up a mountain only to have it roll down once he reached the top. Their analogy rings true for many educators who have become frustrated because their efforts to change practice are thwarted by the framework of controls and normative expectations embedded in their work environments. There is, however, new hope that schools can be transformed. This anticipation springs from a growing public awareness that education is most effective when content and instructional methods are targeted directly to the needs of individual learners by their teachers.

Despite widespread and urgent calls for school restructuring, socialization in the workplace continues to reinforce established teaching practices. In large measure, this may be a product of teachers not understanding organizational behavior and institutional change. Hence, they accept social pressures and tight administrative controls and feel helpless to change them.

In a positive vein, there is growing evidence that teachers and administrators can make a difference in reshaping schools and institutional roles. Studying change in schools, Prestine and Bowen (1993) noted that knowledge structures, beliefs, and accumulated wisdom of practice exert influence on and are influenced by changes in process and substance. They concluded, "It is the overall, shared organizational understandings that bond what is done and how it is done" (p. 316). Thus, the degree to which a community of educators comprehends decision making, organizational behavior, and institutional change appears critical to school restructuring.

One purpose here was to identify major institutional barriers that may prevent teachers from becoming true leaders. This was done not to suggest that reform is futile, but rather to recommend that teacher educators give ample consideration to such obstacles as they redesign curricula. Historically, education professors rarely have looked beyond the campus to determine if their curricular changes would be congruent with school practices (Mertens & Yarger, 1988). It would, indeed, be unfortunate to repeat this error.

If the quest to create a generation of teacher leaders is to succeed, an acceptable knowledge base must be developed—one that will be recognized by policy makers, the profession, and society. In attempting to create this knowledge base, teacher educators ought to give ample consideration to questions about the purpose of schools in society, policy development, tensions between efficiency and democracy, tensions between the collective power of unions and the individual autonomy of professionals, the validation of a professional knowledge base, and the compatibility of teacher professionalism and public education in a democracy.

In addition to creating programs that will be directed toward preparing a generation of teacher leaders, education professors ought to be concerned about overcoming the negative effects of socialization. At the very least, a small number of schools needs to be created that will permit aspiring practitioners to assume responsibility, test ideas, and practice leadership free from the traditional constraints of bureaucratic cultures and climates. These must be environments in which teacher education students can work with highly skilled practitioners who model leadership. It is more likely that educators will be empowered to change public schools if their initial socialization to practice is in an environment that is conducive to professionalization. In this regard, professional development schools—schools built on partnerships between teacher educators and public school officials—have proven to be especially promising ventures (Stallings & Kowalski, 1990).

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