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### Teacher Leader Administrators: Part 3 Of A Symposium On Teachers As Leaders

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# SYMPOSIUM

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## Teacher Leader Administrators

Part 3 of a Symposium on Teachers as Leaders

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**JENNIFER LUNSTEAD**

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**BECKI NORRIS**

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JARROD: Would you still refer to yourself as a teacher, now that you've left the classroom? If you would, what does that mean? If you wouldn't, how does that feel? It's something that I've been thinking about.

BECKI: I don't usually anymore, although I call myself an educator. I think I spend a lot of my time being a teacher of teachers. I spend a lot of time with kids, too. I know what it means to lead a classroom and to run a class. I want to respect the work that teachers are doing for all those hours every week, but that's not where I spend my time anymore. There's a lot of freedom that comes along with not having to be in those classes for so many hours every week. If I'm meeting somebody for the first time, and they work at a school, a lot of times I'll say, "Oh, I work at a school, too, or oh, I'm an educator, too." There's definitely a discomfort with placing myself in that administrator

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category and having that be the only way people think of me. I want us all to be educators.

—Two teacher leader administrators in conversation,  
August 9, 2016

## **Introduction**

We introduced our multipart symposium on teacher leadership in the spring 2016 issue of *Schools*. Our goal was to share with other educators some of the thinking, pathways, successes, and challenges experienced by several cohorts of teachers who have defined themselves as teacher leaders. In this latest entry for the symposium, we examine what happens when self-defined teacher leaders become school administrators. Do teacher leaders who become administrators maintain a teacher identity? Can they remain committed to their vision of teacher leadership when they take on the normative requirements and responsibilities of school administration?

## **A Recap: Defining Teacher Leadership**

In the summer of 2011, 16 experienced teachers and five college professors gathered under the auspices of a Ford Foundation grant to talk about teacher leadership. We met during two summer institutes and several times during 2011–12 and 2012–13 to explore what we meant by teacher leadership and to provide support and conversation for the teachers involved. Since then, we have continued to meet in various subgroups through to the present.

One spin-off group, Teachers Write Now (TWN), has met monthly in Philadelphia since 2013. At a TWN writing retreat, the teachers in that group developed a definition of teacher leadership that they believe challenges neoliberal constructions of teachers and teaching that “position[s] teachers as either nameless cogs in a product-driven system or as those to blame for systemic failure” (Smulyan 2016, 9). TWN teacher leaders define teacher leadership as “a stance, a way of being a teacher, that coalesces around being a professional, an intellectual, a fierce advocate for students and colleagues who ensures that everyone has the opportunity to learn and grow, and a collaborative member of a community dedicated to civic and social justice. They argue that no one could have taught them this stance; it developed through a process of interaction with others who shared their questions, their concerns, and their commitments” (Smulyan 2016, 16–17). This definition aims to capture teachers’ own experiences and to broaden the conversations

they hear in their schools, their districts, and in the public sphere about teachers and teaching and teacher leadership. In the first two parts of our symposium (in *Schools*, spring 2016 and fall 2016), we presented writing by myself, Lisa Smulyan, one of the college professors in the original cohort and a founder of Teachers Write Now, and five of the teacher leaders who participate in Teachers Write Now.

### **A New Twist: Teacher Leaders Become School Administrators**

Some of the teacher leaders in the groups described above have remained classroom teachers. Others have taken on hybrid roles, such as teacher and teacher mentor or teacher and department chair. And some have chosen, over the past five years, to assume administrative positions, often in the schools in which they once taught. As the conversation above suggests, these teacher leader administrators wonder, both before entering administration and as they work through their development as administrators, if and how they can hold on to their teacher leadership stance and identity. They want to honor teachers, believing that teachers are professionals who have the best interests of children always in mind. They want to engage with the teachers in their schools, providing opportunities for collaboration and growth. And they want to maintain an environment within which teachers can recognize and continue to act upon the political work of education. But they are concerned that the demands and structures of more traditional administrative positions will challenge them in this work.

Others have written about school administrators, focusing on leadership roles and style (Hoerr 2005; McCleary et al. 2013), on issues relating to gender and racial differences in experience and approach (Brooks 2012; Shakeshaft 1989), and on effectiveness (Stronge 2008). In my own exploration of school administrators (Smulyan 2000), I found that most of the literature on administration focused on traditional styles of management that emphasized the tasks, skills, and roles of effective principals. Much of the work assumes a style of management and an organizational role that depends on acceptance of hierarchy and power over people and decision making (see, e.g., Gosetti and Rusch 1995). Some of the work in gender and school administration suggests that while women may use a more distributed or collaborative approach to leadership, their behaviors are often limited by the structures, expectations, and demands of the institutions and people with whom they work (Smulyan 2000). Despite more recent emphasis on developing communities of practice that empower teachers within schools and districts, the realities of current policies (testing, assessment of

teachers, etc.) and the historical conventions of leadership tend to push administrators into more hierarchical stances and styles.

In the growing literature on teacher leadership (see Smulyan [2016] for an overview of this literature), there has been no writing that we know of that explores how and why teacher leaders might choose to enter school administration, or on how their experiences as teacher leaders might impact their choices in these more traditional roles. There is also no examination of how teacher leaders may emphasize different approaches, or face different challenges, than administrators who do not come to the role with this stance. Our goal, here, is to begin that exploration, providing a forum for ourselves and for other teacher leaders who might be considering such a path.

In this contribution to our symposium, three teacher leader administrators engage in a reflection on their work. We recorded two conversations in August 2016. Lisa Smulyan provided questions for the first conversation; the teacher leader administrators' questions guided the second. Lisa then transcribed, edited, and organized the conversations into a piece that all four participants initially co-edited. Lisa has also provided this general introduction to the article and to each section. In the discussion that follows, we talk first about how and why these teacher leaders entered teaching and what they found rewarding and challenging about that work. Then we explore how and why they became teacher leaders and, subsequently, entered administrative positions. We talk next about the challenges—foreseen and unforeseen—that they have experienced as teacher leader administrators. And, finally, we return to the question of identity that is raised by Jarrod in the epigraph.

### **The Teacher Leader Administrators in This Conversation**

Jarrold Green has worked in early childhood education for over a decade and is currently the assistant director of the Children's Community School of West Philadelphia, a preschool serving children ages 18 months to five years. In addition to working as a preschool teacher, Jarrod has consulted privately with the families of young children, taught early childhood education classes at several community colleges, and led workshops at national early childhood conferences. He has published several articles in national journals, and he has recently published his first book: *I'm Okay: Building Resilience through Physical Play* (Green 2016). He holds a master's degree in early childhood education from San Francisco State University.

Jennifer (Jenny) Lunstead has been the lower school director at Wissahickon Charter School in Philadelphia for two years. Prior to moving into this position, Jenny taught first grade and second grade at the school for nine

years. She also served as a literacy intern in the Philadelphia public schools for several years. As lower school director at Wissahickon, Jenny supports teachers, students, and families in kindergarten through fifth grade, with a focus on teacher coaching, curricular support, and professional development. She holds a master's degree in school leadership from the University of Pennsylvania.

Becki Norris is currently the middle school principal at the Community Charter School of Cambridge. Becki joined CCSC as a founding staff member and science teacher in 2005. At CCSC Becki supports middle school students in their academic and behavioral growth, communicates with middle school parents, coaches middle school teachers, and works with the CCSC administrative team to develop curriculum and provide a positive learning environment for students, teachers, and staff. Becki has master's degrees from MIT and the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

### **Becoming a Teacher**

I, Lisa, have always been interested in why people choose to teach. Women, who make up close to 80 percent of the teaching staff (NCES 2016, <http://nces.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=28>), enter the teaching profession for several reasons, including the fact that it has been, historically, one of the few jobs open to them outside of the home that provides some financial and intellectual autonomy. Others become teachers because their families include teachers. Some fall into it as an acceptable and available alternative after college. Others see teaching as a way of taking a public stance, of working to make their local, regional, and national communities a more just and equitable place (Smulyan 2004, 2006). Teacher leaders in the Ford Foundation and Teachers Write Now cohorts described many of these rationales in their explanations of why they chose to teach (Tamir 2013). As they taught, and met with other like-minded teachers, they developed the teacher leadership stance described above and explored ways of expanding their influence as teachers. In this section, we hear how Becki, Jarrod, and Jenny backed into teaching, finding that it provided the kind of work that allowed them to meet their own personal, political, and social goals.

...

LISA: I thought we could start by having everybody talk a little bit about how you became a teacher. What was your path into teaching? What did you like about teaching? What was challenging?

BECKI: I was a TA [teaching assistant] in college and really liked it. Then I ended up going to grad school for a PhD program in linguistics, and I TA-ed various linguistics classes as part of my grad program and loved it. I was told by my advisor that I needed to teach less so I could actually work on my dissertation, and I was just crushed by that. I realized that I should be doing what I loved and not what I was dreading. That's why I decided to be a teacher. I have a physics background, and linguistics isn't something that's usually taught to kids, so I went and got trained to teach science.

I was student teaching at the district high school in Cambridge, and my mentor teacher was good friends with somebody who was helping start this charter school that hadn't started yet and hooked me up with them when I was looking for a job. I thought it was pretty exciting to get a chance to start a new school. It was the wild west years and it was fun, and we got to figure out what we wanted this place to be. I was teaching middle school math and science. I was told if I wanted to teach high school kids physics as we got older kids I could, but it turns out I really love teaching middle school and never wanted to go back from that.

I always really liked helping kids who thought they were bad at math or science realize that they could do this; seeing that light bulb go off is one of my main driving forces as a teacher. Working at a charter school we tend to create a lot of our own curriculum, so I always enjoyed being able to create content. That part's always been fun to me. But teaching middle school, you have to be doing so many things at once, and you have to be managing the classroom tightly enough that everybody can learn. You have to be managing hormones and still have to make sure that some kind of point is getting across. It's sort of chaotic and fun to figure out how to manage that chaos. I just always liked that challenge, too.

I don't think I would have wanted to move away from the classroom into a full-time leadership position if I had been a veteran teacher at the school where I am now. We've made this place into a place that can be such a stimulating, growth-oriented environment even for teachers who have been doing this for a long time, and I see how excited they get to become masters more and more and more. I never had any of that when I was a teacher here. The whole six years, I never really had anybody helping me very much at all to grow in my classroom practice.

JENNY: I studied education at Swarthmore (as an undergraduate) and was more interested in education as an academic study or a political topic than teaching, but then I had the opportunity to be an intern teacher when I graduated. My reasons weren't particularly grand. I was looking for jobs, I was qualified to do it, it kept me in Philadelphia, it paid pretty well. When I

had thought about teaching or education, I'd been interested in working with older students—in middle school programs—but the internship program was only for K–3, and it was literacy focused. I found myself in a second-grade classroom, and, like Becki, I found that I love that age of kids. I went very quickly from being an intern to being a lead teacher because the teacher I was interning with quit suddenly in October of my second year and just never came back. Like Becki, I definitely had the experience of just jumping into things and behaving as if I knew what I was doing when I didn't; I didn't have any support really at all.

I then moved to a charter school, partly because my intern position was done, but partly because I was interested in being in a place where teachers did have control of the curriculum that they taught. The district at that time was doing a very scripted curriculum where every school in the whole district was supposed to be on the same page of the basal reader on the same day of the school year. I didn't like that. Also, I wanted to be in a place where teachers were involved in the running of the school to some degree. Wisahickon wasn't a teacher-led school, but it was still evolving from being a start-up school where everybody did everything. There were a lot of teachers who were unofficially involved in administration. Everyone was required to serve on a committee, and everyone was required to serve on a task force. There were a lot of everybody-pitch-in opportunities. A lot of opportunities to write curriculum, not just for your own classroom, but to share.

I really enjoyed my relationships with my students. That for me was the deepest driver of my work. I loved having a classroom. It became my world, and I could make that little world the way I wanted the outside world to be. In the outside world people could be rude or punishment and reward could be the primary means of controlling people, but in the classroom, I could say, "This is a place where everybody's going to be polite; this is a place where everyone's going to be kind, this is a place where we're not going to use punishment and reward in that way." I really loved making that space with my kids.

JARROD: I became a teacher kind of gradually. As the child of two passionate and energetic teachers I always had the possibility of becoming a teacher in the back of my mind—but I majored in theater in college and never thought seriously about teaching. After college, for a few years I did a lot of miscellaneous jobs, and one of them was at Gymboree Play & Music, where I sort of planned lessons, but mostly I played with kids. I found myself thinking, "How am I supposed to change their lives in 45 minutes a week?" Which made me realize, "Oh, maybe what I want to do is work with young children in a more serious way." For reasons that escape me now I decided



that before I started teaching I should start my master's in early childhood. So I started the master's and I started substitute teaching in a bunch of different preschools, and then I began teaching full-time at one of the schools where I had been subbing. I taught at that school in Oakland for a year, then at a school in San Francisco for two years, and then I went back to the school in Oakland as head teacher for another two years.

Then we moved to Philadelphia, and I took a year off from teaching. I was feeling medium done with the classroom. I knew early childhood education was going to be my field for the long haul, but classroom practice was . . . well, I knew that classroom practice wasn't my thing long-term. I had been teaching early childhood education classes at a community college for a little while and really enjoyed that, and I had been presenting at workshops and conferences as well. I had an idea about working directly with families of young children instead of working at a school, and when we moved to Philadelphia, I used it as an opportunity to stop teaching and try out being a consultant for families of young children. That was an interesting experiment, but it became clear consulting wasn't going to be a long-term fit for me.

### **Becoming a Teacher Leader/Administrator**

Past work on school leaders suggests that women and men may take different paths into administration (Smulyan 2000). Men often know before they start teaching that they want to move into administration, and they tend to teach for a shorter period of time before becoming school heads. Women often remain in the classroom longer, partly to gain more experience, partly because they do not always consider moving into administration until someone else suggests it to them. They therefore bring a different set of perspectives to the task. More important, perhaps, than these somewhat essentialized gendered assumptions is the understanding that an educator's prior experiences as a teacher will clearly affect her or his entry into, and perspectives of, administration and impact their assumptions about the role. The three teacher leaders here describe their pathways into administration, demonstrating that push and pull factors played into their decisions.

. . .

LISA: Becki said if she currently taught at her school, she might not have moved into administration. But after six years with little opportunity to grow and develop in the classroom she was ready to try something else. Each of you became teacher leaders in your schools and then administrators. Why

did you decide to become a teacher leader? What led to your move into a more formalized administrative position?

BECKI: Being in a charter school, I started doing other stuff right away. Everybody did. We didn't even have department chairs when we started the school because we had very few people. We started with 15 teachers, but as we got bigger and we needed to be more in departments, I became a science chair. We hadn't really figured out what that meant yet. I don't think I did that much at first, but I pushed really hard for us to have a new teacher mentor program, and it took a couple of years to get that off the ground just because we were all kind of new. Once we got that off the ground, I helped out with that. That was probably the first real leadership thing I started to do.

I felt really challenged with all the leadership work I was doing. I had somebody at school who was mentoring me through the practice of leading adults because I didn't know how to lead adults. I had someone who would sit in on meetings with me and debrief with me afterward and help me know how I could have handled things better with my science team or whatever. That was what I wasn't getting in the classroom. I wasn't getting somebody coming in and watching me and debriefing lessons with me and somebody to bounce ideas off of.

I taught six years before I entered an administrative position. I had planned to teach a little longer, but a position came up, and they don't come up that often, and I love the school, so I figured I would try for it. I did want to become an administrator before I got burned out if being burned out was something that was going to happen. I always knew that I wouldn't want to get to that point; I'd rather move on to something new before that, because I don't think it's good for kids or me. I wasn't anywhere close to burned out. I really enjoyed teaching. I enjoyed being in the classroom every day. I just didn't have anyone really working with me and challenging me when it came to my teaching.

When I applied for the [administrative] job, I didn't know if I would get it. I said to the administration, "I will continue to be your science chair and the science teacher here if I don't get this." I was happy where I was, but I was also okay with moving on.

JENNY: I served on lots of committees; that was a big thing at my school. Interviewing and hiring new candidates, organizing big family and community events like our reading night, writing curriculum, serving on the school improvement committee when we didn't make AYP [Adequate Yearly Progress] one year. I would volunteer whenever they needed a teacher represen-

tative for something. I think I also became a leader more informally with my peers, just a person who would speak up at meetings and that kind of thing.

As much as I loved being in the classroom, I began to feel like I needed a new set of challenges. Even though I had a new group of students each year, and each kid is different, the types of challenges with kids and with the curriculum were starting to repeat year after year. I was also tired, because teaching is really, really hard work. Being in the classroom doesn't ever let up for a second. In my first year as an administrator, I found it less tiring, because the tasks were different and the challenges were new. And being an administrator does let up in a different way than classroom teaching; you can take a breath during the day. It was a nice change.

In the second year, I felt that newness start to wear off. I started to find it equally tiring to be answering e-mails and going to meetings, and I started missing the classroom more. The first year I was an administrator everybody asked me, all the time, "But don't you miss the classroom?" I was like, "No, honestly I really don't." The second year I started missing the classroom, but nobody asked me the question anymore.

JARROD: The thing that I liked and still like about early childhood is the puzzle of young children. The constant questions of, What's going on in your brain? What needs are you expressing? How can I alter what I'm doing to meet those needs? I liked figuring out what's going on for the child, what work the child is doing, and helping to support that work. And from the family side as well, working with the family to help support the individual child. I like the relationship aspects of the work. On the other hand, as a teacher I was finding myself . . . not disliking, but tired of curriculum. Curriculum planning is fine, but it never excited me all that much. Tired of classroom management, too, which I'm pretty good at, but it's a lot of your day when you're teaching three-year-olds. I was finding it tiring and not energizing. There were still a lot of aspects of how we support children and their families that I found really exciting and engaging, and I still do, but that was only a portion of my job description as a teacher.

When I moved to Philadelphia, I was looking for administrator positions. I was thinking about leaving the classroom but continuing to work directly with children and families in a school, so I was looking to be a director or maybe an assistant director. That was now three and a half years ago. Then my wife found this ad for the Children's Community School; it was for a teacher position, and she said, "I know you're not looking for a teaching job, but these kind of sound like your people, you should call them." She was right, they were just the kind of educators I was eager to work with, and it turned out that in addition to looking for a teacher they were also

looking for an assistant director to start very part-time and work their way up in the organization and in the meantime be a teacher. I thought that that sounded like a pretty good fit, because secretly I didn't actually know anything about administration, and I was worried that I was taking too big of a leap, so it would be good to start small at a school with great people. So I was a classroom teacher for two years and a very part-time assistant director at the same time. Then a year ago I left the classroom and became the full-time assistant director.

I want to be an administrator who still gets to focus on individual children and individual families, and I want to add individual teachers to that list. I want to be a supporter of all the different constituents of a school. How can I be supporting each one of those in that investigate-y, problem solve-y, relationship-y way? And I know that administration isn't just problem solving and relationships, that a lot of it is e-mails and budgets and so on. But hopefully, I'm finding, so far at least, that the other stuff that's a part of any job description is less tiring than those aspects of classroom teaching that wore me out. I feel like, so far at least, I made a good trade in terms of how I'm spending my time.

LISA: I think I originally left the classroom with the plan of becoming a school administrator because I wanted more power to make more substantive change. What were your hopes and goals as you moved into administration?

JENNY: As a teacher I couldn't help thinking, "How would I do things differently if I was in charge?" This was true no matter what administrators I was working with. Whether or not I thought they were doing a good job, I still found myself thinking, "How would I do things?" So that's a way of thinking about having more power.

BECKI: I wanted more influence. By the time I finished teaching I was teaching half-time because I was getting freed up to be a chair and a mentor, so I was strongly influencing 40 kids every year. Then I would mentor teachers, and I would be in their classrooms and help them be getting better, and I felt like I was influencing their kids, too. I was influencing those teachers to be better and to feel fulfilled in their jobs. I really liked that adult work side of things, feeling like I can help these people who are in there on the ground every day with students to be doing better and better with those students. To be teaching them more and forming better relationships with them and helping them to turn into wonderful adults. I could do that with a lot more kids if I'm working with their teachers. That was part of what drove me.

JARROD: I am a systems-and-big-picture kind of thinker in general. I really enjoy things like writing policies. I might be fooling myself, but it doesn't feel

to me like I'm saying, "Yes, I can make it the way I want it!" It more feels like, "I can solve this problem. I can see a way that we can all be doing this." Or, "Oh, we're doing six different things at this school, and we can combine them and make it one thing that really works."

LISA: And what were your concerns as you entered the administrative position?

JARROD: I was most worried—and remain most worried—about losing the personal connections with the children. Years ago in grad school I was in a class on administration, and I did a project where I interviewed a half dozen different preschool directors. In answer to the question, "What do you find most frustrating or disappointing about the job?" every single one of them said, "I feel like I never see the kids anymore. I feel like I'm never in the classroom anymore." That really worried me, because I love being on the floor in the classroom relating to the kids.

I have thought really hard about whether I can make this a position where I'm in the classroom frequently, regularly, building those relationships—and honestly it's been a mixed success so far. The first half of last year I was pretty good at being in the classroom every day. After our school moved for the second time in a single year, and I was really slammed working on accreditation, my presence in the classroom really fell away during the spring. I'm thinking hard now about how can I recommit to being in the classroom every day, to be one-on-one with teachers, one-on-one with kids. And I don't know if I can do it as much as I will need. Like Jenny was saying, this work gets more tiring the less new it is. I feel like interacting directly with kids will always stay energizing, so how will I make sure that's a long-term part of my job?

JENNY: I felt concern about losing touch with teachers or with teaching, with what things really feel like in the classrooms. And I think that's proven true to some degree. I was concerned about my relationships with people who'd been my peers, but I really wanted to make the school better, I really wanted to make teachers' lives better, I really wanted to enable them to do good work in the classroom. Right in the beginning I felt like I knew how to do that, but the further away from the classroom I get, the harder it is to know. The answer might be to be in classrooms more. It is hard to get into classrooms, as Jarrod was describing, because so much other stuff can fill up my day.

However, I haven't found it hard to stay in daily contact and build relationships with lots of kids. One thing I really like about my current position is that, while I don't have that insular little community in my classroom anymore, I have relationships with hundreds of kids. I like the parts

of my day when I am with kids. I like doing hallway monitoring in the morning, because, yes, my purpose in being there is partly to stop kids from running in the halls, but my purpose is also to say good morning to everybody. I really enjoy it, and the kids are always like, "How do you know everybody's name?" I enjoy trying to learn the names of every kid in the school.

I enjoy knowing something about each of them. I enjoy walking into classrooms and having the kids know me.

I feel my perspective shifting; it isn't always first from that classroom place anymore. Sometimes that's my second thought, not my first thought. Or even my third thought. Maybe my first thought is the institutional need, and my second thought is the need of a particular family or kid, and my third thought is how this will feel for the teacher, where that would always be my first thought before. That shift is uncomfortable for me.

BECKI: I was really excited to move into administration. I remember wanting very badly to make sure that teachers trusted me and that I wouldn't be one of those administrators who people were always complaining about. It didn't mean that I thought I would always make decisions that everybody agreed with, because you can't, but I've seen administrators who, even when they make a decision that a teacher doesn't like, teachers feel that they can go talk to them and not hold it in or have to just talk about it behind their back.

I really wanted to be that person and not somebody who could be blamed for not listening and just doing things my way. I've always worked on being really transparent, sometimes probably to a fault. There've been times that I've realized I was probably too transparent because sometimes you don't need to see the sausage factory. I've had to figure out the balance, but I think I've maintained a level of transparency where people do usually feel like they can come and talk to me. Even if I've made a decision they didn't like and I don't change it, they will be heard and they'll also understand more about the reasons behind it that they might not have thought about, especially if their sole context is the classroom. I think I've done well with that. There's more stuff that's come up as I've been an administrator that I just hadn't thought to be worried about.

I think one of the things that weighs on me the most is how much power I have to influence the direction the kids' future will go. What do you do when a kid brings a weapon to school, especially if you know that their only other alternative if you don't let them come back is going to be a school where they probably will not end up with a great future? You feel like you can get them through this, but what about all the other parents who, if they

knew you'd let a kid stay there who had brought a dangerous weapon to school would feel like their kids aren't safe? I just had never thought about it as a teacher about how much influence you could have over a kid's future just by a decision that you made and how hard that would be and how many different sides of it there are.

### **Challenges in Being a Teacher Leader Administrator**

It is not a new story that being a principal is hard work. From Wolcott's (1973) classic, *The Man in the Principal's Office* to Barth's (1980) *Run School Run*, to my own (2000) *Balancing Acts: Women Principals at Work*, researchers and practitioners have documented the challenges of being a middle manager in the public schools. School administrators must respond to multiple constituencies—higher administrators, parents, teachers, and students—and balance budgets, curriculum, and personnel. So it is not surprising that these three teacher leader administrators have found their early years challenging. But these educators have an additional challenge that comes from their commitment to value the professional, political, and collaborative community of teachers from which they came. In addition to finding the time to do all of the work required of them, these teacher leader administrators explore how to balance confidentiality with transparency and what is best for a single teacher or a community of teachers with what is required for the school.

. . .

LISA: I get the sense, based on different people's trajectories and how long you've been there, that it was fun to start with and then it got harder, in part because things came up that you didn't anticipate. One of the questions you raised at the end of our first conversation was, "What are some of the challenges that you've had being an administrator that you didn't anticipate?" I'm also wondering, "Why didn't you anticipate them, and how have you adjusted?" One of the key challenges that I heard you starting to talk about was how to maintain some kind of teacher-based relationship with your colleagues and, at the same time, be the kind of administrator that you hoped to be.

JENNY: Becki talked about the balance between being transparent and "not everyone needs to see the inside of the sausage factory." That has been a challenge for me, that kind of balance between the things I thought I wanted from an administrator when I was a teacher, like transparency in everything, and the realization that there's such a thing as too much transpar-

ency. Similarly, as a teacher I wanted more ownership over everything, but sometimes more ownership is more burden to people, sometimes people want you to make the decision, and not every decision needs to go through a consensus committee. Those balances are a challenge.

JARROD: One challenge for me, and in some ways it seems incredibly pedestrian, but one of the things I didn't anticipate is that as a teacher, I felt like I knew how much time everything would take, how many hours in a classroom. I knew how long it would take me to plan a lesson. I knew how long it would take me to respond to an e-mail, or I knew how long it would take me to do an assessment. As an administrator, I feel like that's rarely true. Tasks balloon, they spool out, they get as big as you're willing to let them get. There are very few things that I ever actually finish. More things get to the point of, "Oh, this is as good as it's going to be, and I have to move on to other things." The nebulousness of both tasks and the time tasks take has been a big adjustment for me. I'm trying to figure out, how do I regiment my schedule? How do I assign myself tasks and manage my tasks? That's something I struggle with.

LISA: Jarrod, does that then make it feel less rewarding? When you say things don't get finished, or that they're more nebulous, it sounds like it's more difficult to know when you've got it.

JARROD: In some ways. I have felt like the rewards, when they come, feel bigger, when I get to put a thing to bed. For instance, the day I got to say, "All right, accreditation! We are ready to go. Come on." That felt really huge in a way that I didn't often feel in my day-to-day work as a teacher. I would say it's differently rewarding than teaching, but not necessarily less than.

JENNY: When I was in my school leadership program, there was something we read along the lines of, "A principal's work is chaotic, fragmented, and never ending." There was a list of adjectives to describe what Jarrod is talking about where the work consists of so many small tasks that are always overlapping and don't have clear ends. The word *fragmented* definitely comes up in my mind a lot. It is very fragmented work.

Also, you know what Becki was saying about the challenge of knowing that you represent your school? For me, that's connected to the challenge of remaining deeply connected with colleagues, with teachers. I find myself, to a degree that I didn't anticipate, caught in between what I know to be objectives of the school or the constraints on the school as an institution—regardless of how I feel about them personally—and what I would be advocating for as a teacher, or what the teachers are advocating for. Sometimes that means having information I can't share. Sometimes it means having information I can share but can't do anything about. And sometimes I have informa-



tion that I can share and could do something about, but given the perspective that I now have, I don't think it's the right thing to do. So part of what's challenging about maintaining that teacher stance is that I have access to different information, and it's part of my job is to represent the institution whether or not I agree with the institution. I feel like a middle man more often than I expected. I just didn't think about that much before I began.

LISA: Can you give us an example?

JENNY: Sure. One example is that our school is lucky to be able to have assistant teachers in every classroom K–5, but we can't pay a lot. It's a low-wage job for what we ask people to put into it. We get good people, prospective teachers or young teachers who have just finished student teaching, and they put a ton of heart into their work, but they don't stay. It's a transitional job. That means that teachers have the responsibility year after year of training a new assistant. So some teachers came up with a proposal to have fewer assistant teachers but pay them more, so that we might be able to keep people for longer and teachers wouldn't have to retrain their assistant every year. This is a reasonable, good idea.

It happens, though, that the math of it didn't work out, because our assistant teachers also do a lot of other jobs around the school. They cover recess. They go with the kids to art, library, and things like that. They serve as substitute teachers when our teachers are sick. All those are other positions we would have to pay someone to fill. If you do the math in the budget, this proposal, which seems logical and good, could raise assistant teachers' salaries by such a small amount that it wouldn't realistically impact retention.

It was a great idea, and I appreciated it, but I wasn't going to push for it, because it didn't work. I felt like the teachers who brought this forward never fully believed that we really had explored their idea to its fullest potential or even really considered it. I felt like we were just talking across each other because they were experiencing in a daily way, "It's so frustrating that each year I have to retrain somebody," and I was experiencing in a daily way, "It's so frustrating that this is how much money we have."

A more typical example has to do with personnel. Like, if a teacher or staff person is fired or not rehired, then almost everything to do with that is confidential. Right? Other teachers who've had positive experiences with that person may feel threatened, may feel lost when that person is not staying on the team, and I can't explain.

JARROD: The issue of how much transparency is possible and desirable is something that I've run up against. We had to let a teacher go mid-year this past year. We went through quite an extensive process with this teacher. In the aftermath of it, a lot of staff came to us with concerns and were, essen-

tially, nervous about their own jobs. For some of them, it seemed like the departure of this teacher came out of nowhere. Of course, we couldn't tell other staff everything that happened, but we tried to say, "Oh, no, we went through a whole big process with that teacher. You would never be in that situation and not know that you were in that situation, not see it coming." But they didn't see the process as it was happening, and so some of them became worried.

BECKI: There's all the things that you didn't know when you were in the classroom, that you used to wonder about. People couldn't tell you for confidentiality reasons, and then once you know of them, there's this real clarity of knowing. Sometimes it's a lot to hold. It's a lot to try and make decisions about. I have realized what a burden it is to know about things students are going through—abuse, sexual assault, suicidal depression, family trauma. I have to make decisions about how to support students who are going through these very deep situations, but I have very few other adults to whom I can come for support or advice myself because of confidentiality concerns.

You realize as an administrator that all those years you were in the classroom, these things were probably happening, and you didn't know anything about them. You sort of like catch wind of these things here and there as a teacher. Now I hear all of it. If it comes across anybody's desk, I hear about it. I've seen teachers save lives because they report a concern about a student, and it turns out that student was planning to harm himself or herself. The family often does not want teachers to know what's going on. I want so badly just to tell that teacher, "You might have saved this student's life by reporting this," and let them know what a good, good thing they've done by acting quickly, but I can't. So often you just hold this stuff, and you just can't tell anyone. It's so heavy. All the stuff when you were a teacher that you could blame admin for, I have to take the blame. I have to take that responsibility now. I try and say, "It's my responsibility."

Sometimes, like in your situation, Jenny, there's like nothing anybody could do about it. You still have to just say, "You know what? I'm going to own this." You have to be that one that people can complain to and maybe complain about, especially if it's something that's not movable, but people are still very frustrated. I don't think I was fully prepared for what it feels like to always have to be the person that owns that stuff, no matter what.

Like the eighth-graders this year got into this negative culture space. We had a pep rally for the sixth to twelfth grades, and they had this little contest that each grade was trying to make the most noise and stuff. The eighth-graders just sat there. Eighth-grade teachers and advisors were coming to me saying, "The culture of the eighth grade is just awful, and they're so neg-

ative all the time.” They’re basically saying, “So, what are you going to do about it, Becki?” I wanted to say, “They’re adolescents. What can I do about that?” I had to take responsibility for the eighth grade being irritable and hormonal. It’s certain times sort of just a powerless, frustrating feeling to have to be the person that takes that on.

JARROD: A thing that has occurred to me is the way that tasks and issues get pushed to the side by other tasks and issues, I think particularly in ways I think teaching staff often doesn’t see. For instance, somebody’s brought up a concern, whether it’s Jenny with this particular budget concern, or even just, “Hey, I have a question about this kid, and I e-mailed you last week and then I e-mailed you at end of last week, and then I e-mailed you on Monday. I still haven’t heard back.” You’re like, “Oh, gosh, I’m sorry.” It’s because one of these other issues has come up and pushed the other things to the side. At our school, there was the week that we thought one of the teachers had tuberculosis. We thought that for a long time. She turned out not to have tuberculosis, but the week when my director and I knew that this was going on—that the department of health was saying, “You can’t tell anybody quite yet”—THAT was what we were doing all day. And of course we found ourselves saying a lot of, “Oh, yeah. No, I’m sorry I forgot that e-mail about your curriculum for next week.” That e-mail was still on the teacher’s plate, but it looks very different from the other side.

### **Strategies That Have Worked**

One documented aspect of school leadership is its isolation (Regan and Brooks 1995; Smulyan 2000). While these teacher leader administrators work hard to support and sustain communities of which they are a part, including the teacher leadership groups described in the introduction to this article, on a daily basis they constantly make decisions on their own. As we talked, they recognized that ideas and strategies emerging from their reflections seemed useful. They asked if we could spend some time directly addressing the question, what works?

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LISA: What are some of the strategies you have used to be an effective teacher leader administrator?

JARROD: I’m thinking a fair amount these days about making part of my role helping the teachers I supervise be the best teachers they can be. That means a lot of different things. It means supporting teacher voice. It

means offering them support in a variety of ways. It also means having in mind a trajectory for teachers. I think that speaks to the point of teacher voice being important and valuing teacher's perspectives and expertise and trying to hold onto that perspective as an administrator.

For the children I taught, I would try and take a multi-year perspective about that. Saying to myself, "Some of these kids need more than a school year to change into whoever they're going to be." Now I'm thinking about that for teachers, too, and trying to think of my school's relationship with teachers as being a multi-year relationship and that we're at one point in each teacher's trajectory. You have years to become the teacher you're going to be. I have been trying to look at it that way and trying to help teachers look at it that way. Something to calm my mind.

BECKI: I think I went into it really appreciating administrators who I felt respected my point of view and were transparent with me and told me as much as they could about the whys behind their decisions. I wanted to do that for people. It got a lot more complicated after that. You start to realize what Jenny was saying about how much is oversharing. How much you are actually not able to share. More and more I've also wanted to help teachers grow in the classroom. I've always wanted to help teachers grow in the classroom, but believing how important that is, making it a bigger and bigger priority in my head, especially for the more veteran teachers, has me looking at how that wasn't really done for me.

When it comes to helping veteran teachers grow in their practice, I've pushed a lot to differentiate. We have an intensive coaching-based model. We're always asking how we can differentiate it, to meet the needs of veterans versus newer teachers. One thing I'm always pushing for is for the veterans to get the differentiation that helps them to continue to feel challenged and to grow, so that shouldn't look like us spending a lot less time with them. I think it's just really easy to be like, "Oh, we're going to observe every new teacher once every two weeks, but we'll only observe the veterans a few times a year." I'm always a nagging voice saying, for the veterans I coach, I still want to meet with them every week, because even though they don't have as many immediate things that have to be fixed in their practice like a newer teacher might, those meetings are sometimes where we really have some of those higher-level conversations.

One of the other things that I've done a lot of here is if I see something at the school that could be made better or changed in some way, I try to start a project that teachers and administrators can both opt into working on. I actually had a two-year-long committee of teachers and administrators looking at all our discipline systems. I had teachers who opted into being on a

committee to look at round tables, which are our end-of-year portfolio assessments that every student has to do to go on to the next grade, exploring how other schools do these assessments and how we could get better. Just trying to bring teachers in to decision making.

JENNY: For me the pendulum is swinging back in a good way toward trying to do what Becki's saying about getting teachers to do more of the creative work—leading more of the conversations. I came to Wissahickon when we were a young school. Over the years, teachers, including me, had begun to feel taxed by the number of decisions we were expected to be part of. We had reached a point as a faculty where there was a strong call for administrators to just make the decisions and tell us what to do about certain things. I was trying to respond to that as a new administrator, to be more decisive in order to respect teachers' time.

But our staff has shifted. A lot of our veteran teachers have moved on as the school has grown. We have a lot of newer, younger teachers again. I think we're back in a place where there are people who have more energy to give and want to be more part of decision making. I also have to remember that what I wanted, or what people wanted when I was a teacher, is not what all teachers want or what all teachers want at every moment.

I've been a little behind the curve. I'm picking up on the fact that change has happened. And I'm excited about that change. That's actually the kind of leader I'd like to be. I just didn't know I was going to get a chance. I assumed I knew what people wanted because of my experience as a teacher on this faculty. And I think I wasn't right, because the faculty has changed or the climate's changed. The moment has changed.

JARROD: There's also, I've been finding, a balance to be struck in giving staff the opportunity to be involved in decision making. One thing that happened this past year was that I rewrote our whole hiring procedure for the school. In the early days of the school, every teacher interviewed every applicant, which was great when we had three teachers—it really made it a communal and community-based process. Then about two years ago it just got ridiculous, because all of a sudden we had like seven teachers trying to interview every applicant, and it was absurd. This year I rewrote the whole thing. It felt really important to us to have a lot of people have a voice in the process and have a lot of people have the opportunity to connect with applicants because we as a school are welcoming new teachers into a community. So I wrote this revised hiring process, and it provides all these opportunities for teachers to choose to participate in the hiring committee. But it turned out to be pulling teeth to get teachers to actually be on the hiring committee! We had to say, "Really, we need a couple a more teachers,

please! Who wants to do this?” I feel like the opportunity for teachers to be involved in decision making is very important—but whether they choose to take advantage of that opportunity is something else.

I think about that with families, too. How much opportunity can I give for families to be involved in all the things our school does? But that doesn't necessarily mean people are going to choose to be involved all the time. I think it really does mean something for there to be genuine opportunity. It is helpful for families and teachers to have a voice, to hear things, even if they're not always taking those opportunities.

BECKI: One thing that I've discovered, too, is that different teachers are ready for different amounts of responsibility. Even if people feel like they really want to be in on the decision making, they're not always prepared for everything that comes along with that. I had an experience with a teacher recently who had helped to revise a curriculum and conduct the professional development for other teachers on the new curriculum. A year into the program, when it was time to make revisions, she said, “You know, I don't think I want to do it.” We sat down with her and said, “What's going on here? Is it the scope of it? Is it too much time?” She said, “I don't mind doing revisions. It's just like I don't want to stand there in front of the teachers and present it and be that person, because all year long, I was having to hear about it when things weren't going well.”

She's really strong with what she was doing. She's not ready for the ongoing people leadership part of it. I think that's okay. What it means is that we need to let her create the program and then we need to say, “Okay, how much do you want to lead throughout the school year? Do you just want one of the principals or whatever to be the point person, and you hand off the program just like you would if we had purchased something pre-made?” I think she would be okay with that. I tend to get excited if someone wants to lead a project because I can give it to them and not worry about it. That's not always how it is. Sometimes you still have to take parts of it and scaffold that person into it. Maybe it's a person that will never really want the people leadership side of it, and that's okay, too.

## Identity

Identifying as a teacher is fraught. *Time* (November 3, 2014) and *Newsweek* (March 5, 2010) magazines have both featured covers that depict teachers as bad apples, responsible for the problems and failures of the public schools. In the past 25 years, women have faced the question of why they would choose teaching when so many other options are now

available to them (Smulyan 2004), and men have always had to justify their choice of a female-dominated profession (King 2000). But it turns out that for teacher leaders who are proud of their professional, political, and collaborative stance, identifying as an administrator is, perhaps, even more troubling. Given the historical hierarchy and traditional power differentials between administrator and teacher, these teacher leaders who enter administration struggle to negotiate the administrator identity as they have internalized it and as they imagine others see it.

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JARROD: Would you still refer to yourself as a teacher, now that you've left the classroom? If you would, what does that mean? If you wouldn't, how does that feel? It's something that I've been thinking about.

BECKI: I don't usually anymore, although I call myself an educator. I think I spend a lot of my time being a teacher of teachers. I spend a lot of time with kids, too. I know what it means to lead a classroom and to run a class. I want to respect the work that teachers are doing for all those hours every week, but that's not where I spend my time anymore. There's a lot of freedom that comes along with not having to be in those classes for so many hours every week. If I'm meeting somebody for the first time and they work at a school, a lot of times I'll say, "Oh, I work at a school, too, or oh, I'm an educator, too." There's definitely a discomfort with facing myself in that administrator category and having that be the only way people think of me. I want us all to be educators.

I think a lot of teachers have complicated relationships with their administrators. I think that in a lot of schools it's pretty dysfunctional overall. I don't mind at my school, people knowing that I'm the principal, and if I meet somebody who's trying to work here, I obviously don't hide my role. That would be weird. When it's somebody who might be coming from a school where it's a lot more dysfunctional, and there's this divide between the teachers and the admin, and it's the good guy versus the bad guy, I guess I want to protect myself from how I might be viewed.

I don't know. I probably need to talk this out with a therapist. It's a really interesting question. My husband works for a union company, but he's a project manager, so he's not part of the union. The guys who are in the union think the project managers maybe don't get it. He has to really, really earn their respect. It helps that he used to do what they did. I think if I earn the respect of the teachers, it might be partially because I used to do what they did and partially because I think I usually do good work with them.

JARROD: In the early days of my work in preschool classroom, I had a real crisis about what to call myself to people who weren't in the field. You meet someone at a party, and they say, "What do you do?" I'd say, "I'm a preschool teacher." And they'd say, "Hey, finger painting and diapers, right?" And I'd have to say, "No. Well, I mean, yes, we do fingerpaint and I do change diapers, but no, that doesn't speak to what I find important about my role at all." But that was always a very difficult conversation to have, and very difficult to have it go in the direction I wanted it to go.

In the same way, if I say "I'm an assistant director of a preschool," people don't even have anything to say about it at all! They're thinking "E-mails and forms, I guess." It really frustrates me. The part that excites me about my role and what I think of as the major part of my role is teacher development and support of children and support of families, things that I think of as intrinsically being of a teaching nature. But that's not what the perception usually is.

I don't know how to say it. I think you're right, Becki. I agree that saying "I'm a teacher" doesn't respect the work that classroom teachers are doing. Also, I feel like "teacher" is the best descriptor of the parts I care about in my job. I feel weird saying assistant director because it feels like that's not a great descriptor of what I spend my days doing.

JENNY: I think it's probably 50/50. Sometimes I say I'm a teacher, and sometimes I say I'm a principal. In my position, "principal" is not really right either. I don't have the degree of autonomy that you think of when you think of a principal. It's much more of a middle management position. I rarely tell someone my actual position title, lower school director, because unless someone's coming from an independent school background, that doesn't probably mean that much to them. I'm not the sort of leader that I imagine when I hear the word *principal*—this guy with a mustache who's in his office most of the time, and he shaves off his mustache because the kids read 100 books or something like that. I'm much more involved in the daily life of kids and teachers in classrooms than the principals I remember from my own schooling. But then, as a teacher, I also felt the need to expand somehow on what people might be imagining when I said I was a second-grade teacher. A lot of us felt that. I think that's part of what led us to articulate the teacher leader stance in the first place.

## Conclusion

We share this conversation in order to demonstrate several aspects of our work. First, we see the development of teacher leader administrators as a



work in progress. Jarrod and Jenny commented, toward the end of the conversation, that Becki, as an administrator of five years, seemed more settled in her sense of self in her position than they did after two years of exploring the role. Clearly it takes time to negotiate any administrative position, and, if you are open to growing and changing, you take advantage of time to reflect on your own practice.

Second, context matters. All three of these teacher leaders work in schools in which they, as teachers, had unusual opportunities for leadership roles from the start. Becki was a founding teacher at her school; Jenny and Jarrod came to their schools early in the life of their institutions. All three schools welcomed teacher input and provided opportunities for teachers to try out leadership roles. These three teachers note how changes in school culture and practice over time influenced their own growth as teacher leaders and, subsequently, the demands put on them as teacher leader administrators. For example, Becki has helped to provide opportunities for teachers to grow as teachers so they do not have to leave the classroom as she did in order to experience a challenge. Jenny notes that teacher turnover has created a context in which she can now begin to turn some of the decision making back to teachers, after a period in which more seasoned teachers had looked to administration to be more decisive. And Jarrod points out that the increased number of staff in his school demands some new processes in order to welcome but not require teacher input. Context, specific school context and the time period in the life of that school, both creates opportunities and constrains the possibilities for any school leader.

Third, it seems that administrators who emerge from the ranks of teacher leaders may bring an unusual self-consciousness to their roles. This conversation suggests that the desire to keep teacher voice and perspective in the forefront of their work has an impact on the goals and practices of these administrators. They find themselves examining what is possible and what is challenging about maintaining this perspective as they interact with colleagues around curriculum, school policy, and daily practice. Entering administration with a teacher leadership framework, one that emphasizes the political, collaborative, and professional work of teachers, influences these administrators' actions, reflections, and identities. They still see themselves as teachers, even as they take on positions and responsibilities that sometimes demand a different viewpoint.

Our goal in sharing this conversation within this symposium is to continue to explore teacher leadership for teachers at all stages of their work in schools: beginning teachers, veteran teachers, those who identify as or who want to become teacher leaders, and those who are considering or who have

taken on more traditional administrative positions. We believe that our voices open up new possibilities for teachers and for administrators who see themselves as political, collaborative professionals working to provide a democratic education for students and colleagues.

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