The Issue

Opportunities for teacher leadership are generally bountiful in the Jamaican context given the many curriculum and other school-related matters for which teachers, by virtue of their own professionalism, can assume leadership. However, at the secondary level of the system, subject teachers constitute the largest group of employees in schools and are represented at the base of the schools’ organizational structure. Formal positions of leadership outside the roles of form teachers and classroom managers of students are limited for members of this large group. The generally horizontal nature of the organizational structure means that there is a narrow apex resting on a slightly wider middle which in turn is well grounded on the very flat organizational base.

Teachers outside of those with positions of seniority and thus special posts of responsibility have very little prospects of moving into formal leadership positions. Prized positions such as heads of departments are not rotated and are oftentimes difficult to acquire since a vacancy only arises when the incumbent resigns, retires or is promoted. Outside of other positions of responsibilities such as year group coordinators, and other middle management positions how can classroom teachers who are deemed as proficient or excellent and who have a minimum of five years of teaching experience be co-opted to assume formal leadership roles in schools? A possible answer seem to lie in their roles as teacher mentors, an area in which more and more teacher leaders have emerged and are emerging in other countries such as the United States of America, Canada and England. In these countries, classroom teachers play a significant role in the induction and mentoring of novice teachers.

Purpose of the study

The study examined the opportunities which exist for teacher leaders to emerge in schools and to build the middle leadership base, expanding that base to include not only heads of department and those who are charged with special responsibilities, such as year group coordinators, but to include another type of teacher leader who can provide professional development for prospective and novice teachers. A chief objective of this study is to show that teacher mentors, specially prepared for their mentoring functions, can play a substantial bridging role in closing the gap between theory and practice by helping student teachers ‘see’ how these theoretical ideas underpin, inform and are shaped in practice.

Methodology

This study is based on the professional development activities of the School of Education in the design and implementation of teacher mentor seminars. These seminars were geared at preparing classroom teachers from primary and secondary schools within the Kingston Metropolitan Area to function as teacher mentors to student teachers enrolled in the School of Education’s Bachelor of Education Programmes. The data for this study were therefore derived from testimonials from participants in the first series of seminars held in the academic year 2006-2007 and evaluations by participants in the second series of seminars conducted in the academic year 2011-2012 when the seminars were revived.

Main Findings

Personal views about self as mentor

The teachers who participated in the professional development seminars were involved either because they were selected to participate by their administrative heads or because they volunteered. Of the 37 participants who responded to the evaluation instrument, seventy-five (75%) percent of them considered themselves mentors based on the activities they had been involved in on a largely informal but sometimes formal basis with student teachers and other teachers. The responses which indicated this general view included ‘we have an informal system in our schools’, ‘...within my department there were always new teachers who we had to advise and supervise...’ ‘...it is my nature to assist new teachers to my school, whatever support they need in terms of lesson planning... classroom behavior management and social/emotional support, I would endeavour to offer.’

The benefits and limitations of the teacher mentor seminars

The fact that many of the participants considered themselves mentors without having been formally prepared for the task is an indication that seminars such as those offered by the School of Education at the UWI, are needed. The benefits that the participants indicated that they derived from the seminars are insightful and confirm the importance
Main Findings Cont’d.

The participants in the teacher mentor seminars had varying years of service in teaching with the majority being at that stage in their teaching career where they could be described as proficient or expert based on Berliner’s (2000) conceptualization of the stages of teacher development from novice to expert. Those teaching between 10 to 14 years and over would be at that stage in their teaching careers where they would be displaying high levels of expertise in the classroom. These teachers, if the theories of teacher development are to be taken at face value, would also be reflective about their own competence and choices and the fundamental beliefs and values on which these are based and would be able to assist other teachers in acquiring instructional expertise through planned learning experiences such as mentoring.

While such teachers might have attained these levels of instructional expertise, it does not follow that they can become teacher mentors based on years of teaching experience alone. They need to be professionally prepared to take on this important and influential activity. It is for this reason that professional development workshops or seminars are needed not only to prepare teacher mentors for their roles but to formalize their abilities as teacher leaders.

Teacher mentors as teacher leaders

In considering whether their roles as teacher mentors were equivalent to the concept of teacher leaders, the participants were certain that they were indeed teacher leaders.

Teacher leadership was defined in terms of being a role model, providing assistance to younger teachers, years of service to the school and profession and the acquisition of skills and expertise over time.

One respondent showed clearly the link between teacher mentor and teacher leadership in her reflection on the benefits of the seminar noting among other things that “…Mentoring develops leadership skills and helps to create responsible practitioners…”

Conclusion

The participants in the teacher mentor seminars had varying years of service in teaching with the majority being at that stage in their teaching career where they could be described as proficient or expert based on Berliner’s (2000) conceptualization of the stages of teacher development from novice to expert. Those teaching between 10 to 14 years and over would be at that stage in their teaching careers where they would be displaying high levels of expertise in the classroom. These teachers, if the theories of teacher development are to be taken at face value, would also be reflective about their own competence and choices and the fundamental beliefs and values on which these are based and would be able to assist other teachers in acquiring instructional expertise through planned learning experiences such as mentoring.

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Implications for Policy and Practice

* Experienced teachers, especially those with a caring disposition, should be considered as potential mentors and given the opportunity to be formally prepared to function in the capacity as subject based teacher mentors.

* Selection for teacher mentoring positions could be seen as one route by which subject teachers with the requisite experience and expertise could be promoted to provide instructional leadership without moving into administrative positions.

* Teacher mentoring needs to be formalized and systematized in Jamaica to stem the fallout from informal and oftentimes improper socialization. The absence of such formal induction has been long recognized as being largely responsible for high teacher turnover and attrition globally and for the ‘sink or swim ‘ or ‘baptism by fire’ introduction that neophyte teachers experience on entry into the profession.

The full article may be obtained from :

http://myspot.mona.uwi.edu/soe
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