

Preparing For Change: Instructional Coach to Classroom Teacher

Elizabeth Munroe

St. Francis Xavier University, Canada

Elita Driskill

Education Service Center Region XI, USA

Research on the experiences of teacher leaders returning to classroom teaching (Fiarman, 2007; Munroe, 2013, 2014a) has indicated that this career change is complex and often fraught with unanticipated tensions and frustrations such that the potential contribution of these returning teacher leaders is not realized. We explore the experience of a teacher leader who returned to the classroom well-informed about the possible tensions and challenges she might face. Although she experienced stresses similar to those of other returning teacher leaders, her awareness of potential tensions normalized her feelings and helped her to advocate for herself. We conclude the paper with suggestions for district personnel, school administrators, and returning teacher leaders to optimize the contribution to student achievement and school improvement of returning teacher leaders.

Key words: teacher leadership; collaborative self-study; career transition

Introduction

Many school districts purposefully plan for their instructional coaches to return to classroom teaching after three to five years in a teacher leadership role (Fiarman, 2007). The rotation of coaches is a capacity-building strategy based on the belief that those teachers who leave the classroom and take up a coaching role will learn a great deal that they can then bring back with them to the classroom and to the school. The Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium (2008) asserted that teacher leaders often have “critical content and pedagogical knowledge” (p. 23). They are “experienced professionals who have gained a set of skills that enable them to work effectively and collaboratively with colleagues” (p. 27). Given this, teacher leaders who return to classroom teaching hold the potential not only to enrich the learning of students in their classrooms, but also to enhance the capacity of other teachers in the school and district. Previous research, (Fiarman, 2007; Munroe, 2013) indicated that the return to classroom teaching is complex and often fraught with tensions and frustrations such that the potential contribution of these returning teacher leaders is not realized. Moreover, returning teacher leaders frequently do not stay in classroom teaching and they may even leave the school district. This negates the capacity-building intention of rotating teachers into leadership positions and then back to the classroom.

In earlier studies (Fiarman, 2007; Munroe, 2014a), the returning teacher leaders were unaware of the tensions they might experience as they transitioned back to classroom teaching. The first author of this article (Munroe) wondered what the difference might be if a returning teacher leader knew in advance about the possible emotions she might feel and the sources of stress she might experience. Would this knowledge reduce or dissolve the tensions and smooth the transition process?

Due to a chance meeting with Munroe, Elita, who was returning to teach in the classroom after three years as an instructional coach, learned of the possible tensions and challenges she might face during this career change. This meeting was the catalyst for the collaborative self-study between Munroe and Elita that we report on in this paper. We offer details about the emotions and tensions of Elita, and we reference the work of Bridges (2003) and Lazarus (1963) to help us understand the psychology of this kind of career transition.

As we worked together to inquire into Elita's experience, we constantly wondered what information, advice, preparation, or other supports might have been put into place to aid her transition from coach to classroom teaching. This led us to conclude the paper with suggestions for district personnel, school administrators, and returning teacher leaders as possible pathways to optimizing the contribution of returning leaders to student achievement and school improvement.

A Serendipitous Meeting

Munroe had recently completed a twelve-month case study which documented the experience of a teacher who had served in district and provincial leadership roles for four years before voluntarily returning to classroom teaching (Munroe, 2013). In July of the same year, Munroe attended a conference session during which Elita (one of the presenters) mentioned she was preparing for a return to classroom teaching after three years as a school-based coach. After the session, Munroe invited Elita to converse briefly. She thought it might be helpful for Elita to hear about her research, which had revealed that a returning teacher leader may experience considerable tension during this career change. Elita wrote notes on a business card about the six areas of tension Munroe had identified in her research, and the two new friends parted. In October, Elita contacted Munroe:

I have kept your business card displaying the ideas you shared during our conversation. On difficult days and in times of reflection, I take that card out of my wallet. I look at it and think "Wow, she was absolutely right!" It was helpful to be able to understand what I might be up against, to understand that what I was experiencing was normal.

We arranged to meet over Skype throughout the school year to talk and work together to further understand Elita's particular experience of career change.

Teacher Leadership

Before sharing the details of our collaborative self-study, we consider three aspects of research on teacher leadership that are relevant to our work. Elita believed she had learned a great deal throughout her three years as a coach. She had received extensive opportunities to attend professional development sessions and had undergone specific training in various skills. We reviewed the literature to discover what others have found about formal teacher leaders' development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Secondly, we realized that Elita was going through a career change that had surely been experienced by others, so we looked to the research to learn about the experiences of other teacher leaders returning to classroom teaching. Finally, Elita hoped to serve her new students and the faculty at her new school, but she had no role beyond that of classroom teacher. This led us to read about the potential and effectiveness of informal teacher leadership.

Teacher Leader Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes

The Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium (2008) defined a *teacher leader* as “a teacher who assumes formally or informally one or more of a wide array of leadership roles to support school and student success” (p. 37). *Formal teacher leadership* is usually associated with a named role such as “department heads, curriculum specialists, mentors, or members of a site-based management team” whereas *informal teacher leadership* refers to classroom teachers with no assigned leadership role (York-Barr & Duke, 2004, p. 8).

Formal teacher leadership roles vary considerably according to educational needs which are “numerous, context-specific, and unique” (Taylor, Goetze, Klein, Onore, & Geist, 2011, p. 921). To meet these educational needs, formal teacher leaders may assume a variety of responsibilities: (a) resource provider, (b) instructional specialist, (c) curriculum specialist, (d) classroom supporter, (e) learning facilitator, (f) mentor, (g) data coach, (h) catalyst for change, and (i) learner (Harrison & Killion, 2007). A teacher leader who has assumed those roles surely requires and develops considerable knowledge.

According to Lieberman, Saxl, and Miles (2006), teacher leaders are not only knowledgeable about “schools, the change process, and how to work with students” (p. 405); they also have administrative, organizational, and interpersonal skills. Jackson, Burrus, Bassett, and Roberts (2010) echoed the significance of sound personal skills as part of a teacher leader’s repertoire. After surveying significant teacher leadership research that defined teacher leadership skills, they developed a framework to assess personal skills for teacher leaders. The framework organizes skills under eight headings: (a) work ethic, (b) teamwork, (c) leadership, (d) openness, (e) vision, (f) positive affect, (g) risk taking, and (h) teaching-related skills. In some states, a new teaching license, or an “endorsement that complements an existing teaching license,” is available to teacher leaders (Hohenbrink, Stauffer, Zigler, & Uhlenhake, 2011, p. 43). This, along with various other training and certification initiatives, would seem to confirm that teacher leaders do develop many skills (Berg, Miller, & Souvanna, 2011; Crowther, Ferguson, & Hann, 2009).

In terms of attitudes, formal teacher leaders hold strong convictions regarding the improvement of schooling. Teacher leaders assume leadership positions due to “moral imperatives...to create better learning environments for both teachers and students” (Margolis & Deuel, 2009, p. 271), or “to make a difference beyond their classrooms” (Berg, Charner-Laird, Fiarman, Jones, Qazilbash, & Johnson, 2005, p. 25). Making a difference could take many forms, from influencing how teachers interact with one another and teach their classes, to changing how students experience school, to shaping policies that, in turn, affect the structure of schools.

Moving Away from a Formal Teacher Leader Role

In the literature, little emphasis has been placed on the experience of teacher leaders who move from formal leadership roles to classroom teaching roles. The authors of the studies that have been published each mentioned the emotional aspects of this career change and emphasized the wish of many returning teacher leaders to continue to serve their school beyond classroom teaching duties. It seems that the desire to improve schooling that led teachers to seek out formal teacher leadership positions (Berg et al., 2005; Margolis & Deuel, 2009) does not disappear when they return to classroom teaching.

Steinbacher-Reed and Powers (2011) conversed with instructional coaches who had returned to classroom teaching due to budget cuts. Those teachers described “a variety of

emotions, ranging from excitement at the thought of returning to the classroom to sadness or resentment about losing the identity of coach” (p. 69). According to those authors, “coaching practices can be combined relatively easily with the duties of a classroom teacher” (p. 69) to sustain a coaching identity. They cautioned, however, that school administration support was necessary in the form of release time to plan and do this work, and they noted that coaches who had been reassigned to specialist roles (such as a reading specialist) or roles with some formalized leadership (such as curriculum chairs or team leaders) were better positioned to continue supporting their peers.

Fiarman (2007) interviewed eight formal teacher leaders in Maryland, who were mandated to return to school-based positions for two years after serving three years as coaches outside their schools. The teachers described the tensions and frustrations they felt on returning to school-based positions as “culture shock” (p. 32). They were unable “to put into practice the expanded authority, expertise, and influence, which they had learned and valued while working in the leadership role” (p. 2). They reported that they missed the opportunities for collegial interaction, they felt frustrated by having to implement instructional practices they did not believe were effective, and they felt underutilized. Such responses were heard more frequently from the coaches who returned to full-time classroom teaching than from those who returned to positions with some formalized leadership opportunities.

Munroe (2013) documented the journey of a teacher leader who returned to classroom teaching. That teacher experienced many of the frustrations described by the teachers in Fiarman’s (2007) study. In another case study, Munroe (2014a) wrote about a teacher leader who found the career change to be relatively stress-free. That teacher was assigned a formalized leadership role that was supported by slightly reduced classroom teaching duties.

Informal Teacher Leadership

As indicated above, teacher leaders who return to full-time classroom teaching may still have the desire to provide support for school improvement. However, is it possible for classroom teachers to be effective as informal teacher leaders? Donaldson (2007) explained that although much was known about formal teacher leaders, “informal teacher leaders remain a precious yet unrecognized leadership resource in most schools” (p. 137). Stoelinga (2008) asserted that “informal teacher leaders can be extremely powerful” (p. 117). Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) concur: “drawing from their expertise and passion for teaching, [informal teacher leaders] influence other teachers...through having casual conversations, sharing materials, facilitating professional development, or simply extending an invitation for other teachers to visit their classrooms” (p. 7).

A strong classroom connection enables informal teacher leaders to establish relationships, keep the focus on teaching and learning, and have a positive effect on how to address classroom challenges (Donaldson, 2007). Mangin and Stoelinga (2008) explained that “teachers’ connections to the classroom...[and their] ability to influence instruction” (p. 2) position them naturally as leaders for initiating change in teaching. Their interactions with colleagues enable them to influence instruction without formal leadership roles.

Formal or informal teacher leadership requires “favourable cultural conditions...created through certain structural arrangements” (Muijs & Harris, 2006, p. 967), and school administration support is integral to these arrangements. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) explained that “teacher leaders cannot influence others and put plans into action if the school context is not supportive of those initiatives” (p. 84). According to Jackson et al. (2010),

instituting teacher leadership in schools requires the educating of principals, teacher leaders, and teachers in order to foster the conditions for teacher leadership.

In summary, this selected review of teacher leadership supports the notions that teacher leaders in formalized roles develop considerable knowledge and skills and they exhibit attitudes of concern and responsibility for school improvement. Teacher leaders who return to classroom teaching may retain these attitudes and, therefore, may wish to continue to lead even without a formalized role. Teachers serving in such informal leadership roles are thought to hold considerable potential for contributing to school improvement; however, realizing this potential requires appropriate school structures and administrative support.

Methodology

In this paper, we report the results of our collaborative self-study of a teacher leader's experiences after returning to classroom teaching. Self-study is usually associated with study of practices within teacher education "so that more can be learned by future practitioners and...by future teachers and teacher educators" (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2013, p. 75). Although our work is not focused on teacher education, we consider our research to fall into the realm of self-study. Together, we have explored the return of a teacher leader (Elita) to classroom teaching, and we present details of her journey here for consideration by other teacher leaders who return to classroom teaching, as well as by district personnel and school administrators who make decisions about placing and supporting returning teacher leaders. We believe this story could inform their actions and decisions. It is our way of "making knowledge development move beyond the individual to the professional community more generally" (Loughran, 2006, p. 43).

One feature of self-study is that it "tends to be directed by problems, dilemmas, and tensions and these situations inevitably direct data gathering" (Loughran, 2006, p. 50). This focus on a problem may lead to an under-emphasis on successes in the setting. This was certainly true for our investigation of the tensions that may be experienced in a change from coaching to classroom teaching. Elita enjoyed many aspects of working with students and staff in her new school, but those aspects were not the focus of this study and so are not evident in this report.

Although research using the self-study methodology has been published in reputable, peer-reviewed journals (Milner, 2007; Montecinos, Cnudde, Solis, Suzuki, & Riveros, 2002; Samaras, 2013), such research may appear to be less rigorous than traditional research due to its being "a mongrel" with methods borrowed from other "more established forms of research" (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 15). To counter this perception, researchers must provide details about data sources, collection, and analysis so that the reader may judge the legitimacy of the research presented. After Munroe contacted Elita by phone in October, they met via Skype three times: in late November, early February, and early May, for approximately one hour each time. Munroe recorded the conversations, which were later transcribed by a research assistant. Elita also kept a journal, in which she recorded her reactions and thoughts as she progressed through the year. Ultimately, we both read the transcripts and the journal and collaboratively decided on examples to highlight in this paper.

In this article, we use a framework of six areas of unanticipated tension (Munroe, 2013) to examine Elita's journey: (a) defining her role, (b) experiencing a lack of acknowledgement or recognition of her previous experience, (c) finding opportunities but no time for leadership with staff members, (d) taking part in brief rather than in-depth professional conversations, (e) having self-imposed high expectations for her own teaching, and (f) experiencing the isolation of being

in a career stage different from that of her colleagues. Munroe had developed this framework after analyzing the experience of a previous research participant.

Munroe had shared these sources of stress with Elita during their chance meeting at a conference and Elita used these areas of tension as reference points as she sought to understand her own emotional reactions during her career change. Thus, these six descriptors structured our on-line conversations as we pondered two questions: First, did Elita experience the same sources of stress as Munroe's previous research participant? Second, what was the effect of knowing in advance about these possible tensions? Before exploring our answers to those questions, we provide additional context by introducing Munroe and Elita.

The Researchers

Collaboration is described as a strength in self-study (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2013; Loughran, 2006). Loughran (2006) asserted:

Valuable learning occurs when self-study is a shared task...[wherein]...the learning outcomes will broaden the understanding of both the individual whose situation is the focus of the self-study and the *significant other* with whom the sharing of the adventure occurs. (p. 49)

As colleagues from different countries and different professional perspectives, we believe our collaboration served to broaden the contextual and individual understanding of Elita's experience. We concur with Loughran (2006) that "new understandings may emerge as situations become better clarified and questioned" (p. 49) through a collaborative, investigative process.

Munroe. As an assistant professor in a Canadian university Faculty of Education, Munroe taught courses at the Bachelor of Education and Master of Education levels. Her research centered on professional learning and school improvement. She had conducted a series of case studies of other teacher leaders returning to classroom teaching, which enabled her to bring forward examples and questions to ponder during the conversations with Elita. Munroe also had some relevant professional experience to draw upon. Some years prior, she had gone through a career transition, returning to classroom teaching after ten years studying and teaching at the university level. Although her experiences are not analyzed in this paper, they added to her ability to empathize and helped to support the notion of the normalcy of Elita's experiences.

Elita. Elita was a middle school teacher with 20 years of experience teaching in a fast-growing district that was evolving from rural to suburban. Her district was located between two large cities in Texas, and her school enrolment had grown to over 900 students. Elita served for four years as District Mentor Coordinator, supporting more than 250 newly-hired teachers and their mentors per year. She developed a district induction system with coaching support from a consultant. For three of those four years, she left classroom teaching and worked at her home school as an Instructional Teacher, a position similar to a school-based coach. Her duties included gathering resources, processing and sharing data, managing student tutors and schedules, and working with teachers in their classrooms to support district and school initiatives. Throughout these years, she planned and presented workshops for the district and

school. Elita constantly augmented her own professional learning, reading current literature, and attending and presenting at national conferences.

After these three years, Elita returned to classroom teaching due to budget cuts. She left her home school and moved across town to a high school because, if she had stayed at her original school, a novice teacher would have had to relocate. Elita hoped to get involved with leadership at the new school, but during her interview for the new position, the principal did not ask her to join the leadership team.

Did Elita Experience the Six Sources of Stress?

The first question for our self-study stemmed from our curiosity around the stresses experienced by Munroe's former research participant. We wondered if Elita would have some of those same concerns. As we conversed throughout the year, Elita confirmed that she did feel those tensions. She describes her experiences here to provide a glimpse into the complexity of this career transition.

Definition of Role

Elita accepted a teaching position in a school of 2000 students where she knew only two assistant principals and three staff members. Recognizing the norms of school culture (Lortie, 1975), Elita wanted to fit in as a teacher. She explained, "I don't want to come across like a know-it-all, so I've been reticent in sharing to avoid being overbearing." But, similarly to the participants in the study by Steinbacher-Reed and Powers (2011), Elita wanted to continue to act as a leader. This desire led to some tension for Elita: "I saw myself as a coach and they saw me as a teacher. So I had more trouble with the roles than they did; they knew what my role was." Elita was experiencing the tension that results "when other people's defined expectations for the role and its purposes are at odds with one's own" (Schmidt, 2000, p. 830).

Lack of Recognition and Acknowledgement of Past Experience

Elita realized that the people at her new school knew very little about her past experience and areas of expertise. However, she found it awkward to self-promote at the same time as fitting in with the staff. She found staff development days particularly difficult. She wrote in her journal:

Two of the trainings yesterday were about software I used and trained others on for the last three years. At one of the sessions, the presenter mentioned experts in the room, and I was not among them. No one seemed to know my qualifications. It feels as if I have to prove myself all over again. It feels prideful to walk up to people who hardly know me and say, "I know how to do that." Self-promotion feels so stiff and unnatural; yet, I feel my skills are overlooked and under accessed. I feel like the invisible woman.

Opportunities— but No Time—for Instructional Leadership

Elita recounted a frustrating and disappointing experience of offering leadership to a new teacher but having no time to do this effectively. She explained that Hannah was a long term substitute teacher, fresh from college, with good prospects of obtaining a full-time position. At the beginning of the year, Elita and she attended training sessions together, and by the second week of school, Hannah had made her way to Elita's room for lunch and conversation. They

discussed Hannah's need for support with teaching. With Hannah's permission, Elita e-mailed the principal and set up observations in some high-quality English classes, and she invited Hannah to one of her own classes for observation. Elita reflected:

Though I had the knowledge and ability to serve her, I did not have the flexibility or time to serve her adequately at the beginning of the year. She eventually left our school. In all likelihood, she will not return to teaching. That loss haunts and frustrates me. My knowledge and skills were useless in light of the situation.

Many researchers have emphasized that structures must be in place if a classroom teacher is also to be an instructional leader (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Muijs & Harris, 2006; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). It is not surprising that those structures were not in place for Elita since she had no defined leadership role in her new school. Nevertheless, as is obvious from her words, Elita found this inability to adequately help this new teacher to be very stressful.

Brief Versus In-depth Professional Conversations

Elita recognized that she had been accustomed to prolonged professional conversations in her position as a coach. When she returned to classroom teaching, she discovered she was only able to engage in brief chats with other teachers, and she experienced some tension around that change. Elita commented, "Sometimes colleagues hardly have time to say hello as we pass in the halls. Fortunately teachers from my former school and fellow coaches continue to call for coaching time. Those calls renew my energy." Elita also reflected on the focus or content of professional conversations she had in her new teaching position. She wrote in her journal:

Colleagues want to talk about planning lessons, which I desperately need; however, I find myself craving big picture conversations. In order to visit with the principal, I have to make an appointment, and then I might have only 20 to 30 minutes of insight into her thinking. I miss the one on one almost instant access to the principal in my former role and knowing what was happening in the school where learning and initiatives were concerned.

It is apparent that the change in role for Elita represented a loss in terms of her participation in schoolwide planning. This kind of loss was also mentioned by the returning coaches studied by Fiarman (2007).

Self-Imposed High Expectations for Teaching

During Elita's years as a coach, varied professional learning opportunities helped her to develop advanced pedagogical and content skills. She returned to the classroom with very high expectations for her teaching, and she experienced considerable stress when she realized she was not reaching her self-imposed goals. Elita acknowledged:

This area was one of the most difficult challenges. When I planned professional learning sessions, an average of six hours planning went into each hour of a session. As a teacher I had to plan for five English classes and an inclusion class, while learning new curriculum and a new school culture. I wanted daily lessons to be as effective as professional learning sessions for adults and made efforts to plan accordingly. In early

December, at near exhaustion, things had to change. At that point I realized my students wouldn't benefit if this continued. I resolved to implement new strategies weekly rather than daily. Many days I stood in front of the class knowing I knew more than I could implement. I had to pull back and deliberately not do things at my expected level. I have the frustration that I know more than I can do; it's just not possible to implement what I know. I have to just pull back and give myself permission and not be as good as I want to be.

All returning teacher leaders with whom Munroe has conversed echoed Elita's sentiments with regards to their teaching practice (Munroe, 2014b). The coaches had learned many skills and had high aspirations for modeling wise practices, but they ultimately gave themselves permission to take some time to adjust to their new roles.

A Unique Position

Elita described returning to classroom teaching as "an emotional roller coaster ride." Although she was a former teacher and she felt she should feel confident and competent, everything seemed new. Elita explained that "the double barrier of assistance" (Huling-Austin, 1990) was evident:

There's a barrier between the people working on my team and me because they're afraid to say, "Hey Elita, you need this" or "You need to do that." They think it's going to hurt my feelings and they don't want to overstep their bounds. I have a similar barrier where I don't want to look totally inept all the time and have to ask every single little thing.

Elita agreed that she was in a unique position as she went through this career transition. She reported, "My bosses don't understand, my fellow teachers don't understand, even the coaches who kept their positions don't get it." She was happy to be able to converse with Munroe about the process she was going through, saying "the first couple times we talked, I thought to myself, it was like my heart could beat again. I said to myself, 'It's OK.'"

Discussion

To the first research question, *Did Elita experience the same sources of stress as the returning teacher leader in Munroe's case study?* We would answer "yes." As described above, the six sources of tension did enter her life as she returned to teaching. We found that Bridges's (2003) theory about the psychology of transitions provided us with insight into Elita's stress. Bridges (2003) distinguished between change and transition, proposing that "*change* is situational," whereas "*transition*...is psychological" (p. 3). Change may happen quickly, but transition may take much longer. Transition is a "three-phase process that people go through as they internalize and come to terms with the details of the new situation that the change brings about" (p. 3). The three phases consist of an ending, a neutral zone, and a new beginning.

During the *ending* phase, people may experience denial, shock, anger, frustration and/or ambivalence. Elita did experience many of these emotions, as she was disappointed in her mandatory return to classroom teaching. During this phase, Bridges (1986) would suggest, Elita was letting go "of the old situation and...of the old identity that went with it" (p. 25).

The *neutral zone* exists between “the old reality and a new reality that may still be very unclear.” Much of the description of Elita’s responses to her new classroom teaching position (as described above) represents her progress through this neutral zone. “It is a time of loss and confusion, a time when hope alternates with despair and new ideas alternate with a sense of meaninglessness, a time when the best one can do sometimes is to go through the motions” (Bridges, 1986, p. 25). Although a difficult time, it is also productive because people are re-orienting and that is “at the heart of transition” (p. 25).

The third phase of the transition is a *new beginning*. This may involve “developing new competencies, establishing new relationships, becoming comfortable with new policies and procedures, constructing new plans for the future, and learning to think in accordance with new purposes and priorities” (Bridges, 1986, pp. 25-26). In February of the school year, Elita seemed to be leaving the neutral zone and moving towards new beginnings:

I’m actually planning to make an appointment with my principal, to sit down with her and lay out some of the things that I’m capable of and things that I’m willing to do in the school....I’m ready to tell her these are the skills I have to offer....I can coach before school, after school, I can coach during my conference period or during my lunch. If you’ll give me those opportunities, I’ll do that.

Later, Elita reported she had followed through and met with her principal. As a result, she was going to do some specific coaching in her school. Also, she attended a conference and subsequently led a professional development day with her colleagues. She commented, “That was the first staff development day that I didn’t have that overlooked/underused feeling.” In Bridges’s (1986) terms, it appeared that Elita had moved to the third phase of her transition—a new beginning.

Our second research question centered on trying to understand if it made any difference that Elita knew in advance the tensions she might experience as she underwent her career transition. Elita indicated that she had kept the business card with the six sources of tension experienced by Munroe’s research participant and she had read it frequently. During the first few months of her return to classroom teaching, when she was on an emotional roller coaster ride, she was at least reassured that her feelings were “normal”: Someone else had gone through a similar experience and had also felt these tensions. When we talked in November, Elita commented about how grateful she was that we had met in the summer:

I’m not sure I would have made it as well as I have, had we not met and had you not shared with me those areas of tension that I might expect....It was helpful just to be able to understand what I might be up against.

The positive effect of knowing in advance about possible tensions or stressors that might be related to an event is explained in Lazarus’ (1963) seminal work. He proposed that uncertainty about an event or series of events increases stress levels, whereas some predictability may serve to reduce stress. Even if an event is unpleasant or out of one’s control, a person who is able to anticipate certain consequences is able to cope better. Thus, Elita’s advance knowledge of the possible tensions helped her to cope throughout the three phases of her career transition. Conversing with Munroe and reflecting on the underlying reasons for her stress also

had the effect of enabling Elita to advocate for herself. She was able to understand and rationalize some of the frustrations she was experiencing and decide how to address them

Concluding Thoughts

Through our collaborative self-study, we found that Elita experienced six sources of tension as she underwent the career transition from a formal teacher leader role to classroom teacher. Knowing in advance that she might experience these sources of stress did not erase them; however, knowing that another teacher leader had felt these same emotions upon returning to classroom teaching did help Elita to cope. Her reactions were affirmed as normal.

As we reflected on Elita's experience, we thought about what information, advice, preparation, or other supports might have been put into place to aid her transition from coach to classroom. Recognizing that "the aim of self-study research is to provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm and settle" (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 20), we do not draw rigid conclusions from our research. On the other hand, we believe that our self-study "offers new perspective" (p. 19) and we have an "obligation to seek to improve the...situation not only for the self but for the other" (p. 17). We have developed three avenues of approach we believe would be helpful for the transitioning teacher leader: (a) awareness, (b) intention, and (c) support. If we were district personnel making placement decisions about coaches returning to classrooms or if we were school administrators receiving a coach into a teaching position in our school, we would attempt the actions proposed here. If we were conferring with teacher leaders returning to the classroom, we would encourage them to think about these actions. We invite readers to consider our suggestions in light of their own contexts and experiences.

Awareness

When Elita returned to classroom teaching, she had the benefit of knowing about some possible tensions or stresses related to this significant role change. This reassured her that the emotional roller coaster ride was normal. Her district managers and school administrators had no idea that this career transition would be stressful in these ways. They also did not seem to be aware of what Elita had done as a coach. The following strategies might build awareness for various stakeholders:

- Organize seminars so that returning teacher leaders and district and school administrators can explore the six areas of possible tension and create action plans to mitigate these causes of stress.
- Schedule conversations between school-based administrators and returning teacher leaders to explain the previous experience of the returning teacher leader.

Intention

All returning teacher leaders who have spoken with us, through Munroe's ongoing research and at conference sessions where we have presented our collaborative self-study, have emphasized that they want to fit in with the culture of the school they are joining. Many, but not all, also wish to continue to serve other teachers and the school in some way. We believe the following processes may be helpful so reentry is enacted with intention:

- Schedule conversations between school-based administrators and returning teacher leaders to establish a potential role in instructional leadership and mentoring. Develop a plan for the returning teacher leader to contribute to district-wide or in-school professional learning.
- If the returning teacher leader is to provide leadership, allot time for that work. Explain the teacher's leadership role to the staff so that all are aware of the possibilities for support and involvement.
- For returning teacher leaders who initially hesitate to take on leadership work in the school, schedule another conversation later in the school term. By then, the returning teacher leader might be more prepared to take on leadership and might be more aware of the extent to which his or her knowledge and experience could benefit the school or district.

Support

A returning teacher leader requires support to navigate the change in role. As Bridges (1986) explained, "the disidentification process [may be] very painful and even terrifying," but "if people are given assistance in redefining themselves and their future directions" (p. 29), new opportunities may emerge. The following processes might be put into place to ensure support throughout the school year:

- Connect the returning teacher leader with someone else in the district who is experiencing the same change in role. This link will help the returning teacher leaders to "realize that they are neither isolated nor insane" (Bridges, 1986, p. 29).
- Recognize that the returning teacher is similar to a new teacher, and carry out quarterly needs assessments to offer timely support.

In conclusion, we feel it is important to note that the majority of teachers who have held teacher leader positions tend to pursue further teacher leadership or administrative positions (REL West, 2010). Many of those who return to classroom teaching, voluntarily or involuntarily, do not stay in that position. After one year in the classroom, Elita moved into a curricular leadership position in another school district. Similarly, after one year, the two teachers described in Munroe's studies (Munroe, 2013, 2014a) became school administrators in different schools in their school districts. After their mandatory return to school positions, five of the eight coaches in Fiarman's (2007) study left classroom teaching, wanting "jobs with many of the characteristics they valued" as teacher leaders (p. 20).

We would not suggest that returning teacher leaders be forced to stay in classroom teaching positions. However, in consideration of the intentional rotation in some districts of teacher leaders back to classroom positions, the degree of expertise those coaches embody, and the potential effect of classroom teachers in supporting and influencing change in other teachers, we have identified possible strategies to smooth the career transition. We recommend further research be conducted to determine if these, or other, approaches would be effective in enabling schools to benefit from the knowledge and skill of teacher leaders returning to classrooms.

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