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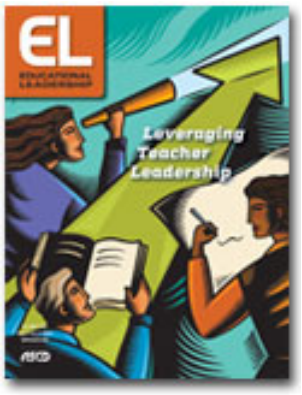

Teaching Is Leading

Michelle Collay

Teacher leadership happens every day, both inside and outside the classroom.

Why do we feel that we need to apply the word *leader* to only certain teachers? One reason is that most of us think of a leader as someone who takes on additional roles outside the classroom. The perception that "regular" teachers are not leaders is reinforced by historical patterns of school management, such as physical isolation, exclusion of teachers from decision-making roles, and the chronic de-skilling of teachers through a constant barrage of misguided mandates (Cochran-Smith & Lyttle, 2006).

Yet effective teaching *is* leadership. Leadership in schools means holding fast to a vision of democratic learning communities and taking actions, small and large, to disrupt inequity and to create real opportunities for students, families, colleagues, and community members. And in spite of inadequate funding, social factors that limit teacher professionalism, and outdated school structures, effective teaching and learning happen in all kinds of schools every day, as teachers lead by leveraging relationships within and beyond their classrooms.

Leading from the Classroom

Teachers lead by using their professional knowledge and judgment to support the learning of all students, by guiding the professional development of colleagues, and by participating in communities of practice (Barth, 2001; Danielson, 2006; Donaldson, 2007). Teaching is a vocation requiring everyday acts of leadership—courage, a clear vision of what matters, strong relationships with others, and resistance to the bureaucracy that can grind teachers down.

The following four dimensions of powerful classroom-based leadership are exemplified by 50 experienced teachers working in some of the most challenging urban districts in the United States (Collay, 2011). As program director and instructor in a teacher leadership master's degree program, I documented these experienced teachers' reflections about leadership over five years. I visited their classrooms, observed their courage and efficacy in action, and witnessed what transformative teacher leaders do.

Teachers Lead by Teaching Well

Teaching well means embracing the tensions of being in relationship with students, colleagues, parents, and the community (Gergen, 2009). Teaching is a messy business, requiring us to be theoretically grounded and purposeful while we respond to the ups and downs of the school day: providing one student with more structure and another student with less; staying in at lunchtime with a recalcitrant student in one case and sending her out for extra recess in another.

Those who teach are quite conscious of the countless decisions that influence relationships and build connections that lead to learning. Such intricate and subtle decision making requires professional expertise.

Teaching has been compared to jazz improvisation (Cuban, 2011), and like jazz musicians, teachers draw on deep knowledge of the art, technique, and emotional work of making meaning together. Here are some examples of how teachers lead by establishing and nurturing relationships:

> Sheila finds out that a student failing her English class will be kicked off the soccer team because of his low grades. She meets with the soccer coach and student to brainstorm some ways to raise his English grade.
>
> When Richard e-mails the parents of one of his high-performing students because she has stopped turning in homework, he discovers that her mother has been deployed with the National Guard. He asks the student to come by his room one morning each week so that they can send her mother updates. He also uses the sessions to check her homework and provide tutoring.
>
> Cristina has noticed a pattern of bullying by a group of 8th grade girls. She refers them to the guidance counselor, as required by school policy, but in her own classroom she also assigns each of them to tutor an English language learner. She meets with the girls weekly to learn about their tutees' progress.

Teachers Lead by Collaborating

Teacher collaboration with students, families, and colleagues is essential to create conditions for learning. Unlike directing a meeting or managing a staff, this collaboration is often invisible. School cultures and physical structures—from policies that forbid teachers to leave their classrooms unsupervised to long hallways that separate staff members from one another—often limit collaboration among adults. The very act of talking with a colleague during the day can be an accomplishment.

Teachers overcome such boundaries in creative ways, including developing study groups or professional learning communities. They lobby the school administration for designated prep time, use that time for relevant work, use emerging technologies to communicate, meet outside school, and find and share resources. But this kind of collaboration takes persistence (Collay, Dunlap, Enloe, & Gagnon, 1998).

Schooling traditions also limit collaboration between parents and teachers. Teacher–parent collaboration is evident in many elementary classrooms, typically decreases by middle school, and virtually disappears in high school. Partnering with parents can be fraught with tension on both sides, but some teachers seem to have a knack for building trust with even the most anxious parent or caretaker. It takes additional courage and leadership to share the path of coteaching and coparenting when divisions of race, language, and class complicate the relationship (Keyes, 2000; Miretsky, 2004).

Communication with parents is essential in teachers' efforts to make sense of students' lives within and beyond the classroom, a capacity that is often underrated and overlooked, even by teachers themselves. As a parent of two school-age children, my main concern at the parent conference is, Does this teacher *see* my child? What I'm really asking is, Does this important adult in my child's life know her as a whole person, with

all her warts and gifts, or is she just a name in the grade book? The quality of their relationship has a profound influence on the quality of her learning.

The following examples show how teachers lead by building connections within and beyond the classroom:

Dan calls three parents each night and shares something positive about their child.

Maria organizes a termlong literacy project requiring her 5th graders to write reviews of Newbery Award books for primary students, interview primary teachers about their literacy curriculum, suggest age- and topic-appropriate chapter books, and volunteer as readers in the primary teachers' classrooms. The 5th graders send their reviews to the books' authors.

Philomina arranges for students from her 7th grade life science classes to participate in a local nonprofit group's "Save the Creek" clean-up event. In preparation, they study urban watershed ecology in class, interview a local ecologist from the Environmental Protection Agency, and e-mail members of the nonprofit group about examples of successful trout reintroduction in the same watershed. Students joining the clean-up receive a membership in the nonprofit group, and skeptical neighbors now see students from the local middle school as an asset to the community.

Tai uses resources available through the California History–Social Science Project to take high school students through a study of their family's journey to or across North America. Each student interviews an immigrant from his or her ethnic or language community, often a family member. The videotaped interview and key events of that family's and ethnic group's journey are portrayed on a web-based timeline, with audio explanations provided in two languages. The materials are made available at the community library and are used by teachers of English as a second language for their adult literacy classes.

Teachers Lead Through Inquiry

Studies conducted by education researchers often use "scientific" research methods that exclude the important factor of relationships between students and teachers. But classrooms are not laboratories, and students are not rats (fortunately). Classrooms are communities of practice, some more evolved than others. Measuring student "outcomes" on standardized tests provides *some* information about what students know, but it captures only a small part of a larger picture of complex, socially constructed knowledge.

When teachers lead through inquiry, they must begin with asking the right questions. Teachers must learn to trust their instincts, develop their own questions, deliberately document what they observe, and determine what action is needed. The hard-won knowledge they glean from such inquiry can empower them to hold their ground in the face of the next mandate or initiative. Thus, classroom-based inquiry is a requirement for good teaching and learning, not a luxury.

Formal teacher-led inquiry may include asking specific questions about how students learn: for example, conducting a child-study of one student's emotional development or comparing the progress of early readers who experience a new reading program with the progress of past cohorts of early readers. In addition, teachers conduct multiple forms of informal inquiry every day—from observing that a student is acting withdrawn and unhappy as he arrives at school to glancing at students' math tests and noting that almost the whole class missed problem 23. In the first case, the teacher may draw on her knowledge of the child, the family, and the school to sensitively explore why the student is upset and to respond constructively. In the second case, the teacher uses her awareness of curriculum flaws, knowledge of effective instruction, and interpretation of test results to conclude that students did not understand the material and she must teach it in a different way.

Here are some examples of teachers leading through inquiry:

Jessie, Andrea, Jake, and Melissa are differentiating a math curriculum for middle school pre-algebra. Their department adopted a lesson-study framework for professional development. These teachers meet weekly to review their lesson plans, critique one another's instruction, and collect and organize unit assessment data. They observe and discuss one teacher's lesson each month. They record their observations of students' engagement with the math materials, collect assessment data from their own students, and use the test scores to identify target areas for instruction.

A school implements Response to Intervention (RTI) to differentiate instruction for its students. Although grade-level teams agree that the concept has merit, even experienced teachers are challenged to find time and space for assessing students and adapting their instruction. In addition to following the required protocol for identifying students and documenting their progress, grade-level teams use their shared prep time to discuss the challenges they have encountered and to strategize about the logistics of making RTI work. They invite the school's data coach to facilitate the development of student case studies, which they use to analyze individual students' strengths as learners, to compare writing samples from early efforts to final drafts, and to assess the fluency of English language learners. This enables them to form a comprehensive portrayal of student ability and to design instruction accordingly.

Teachers Lead by Developing Partnerships

Some partnerships are teacher-initiated, as productive teachers embrace expertise beyond the classroom and school. Teachers must also navigate partnerships that are not of their own making, such as those resulting from a mandate, a reform effort, or an external grant.

Good teaching in the context of either a welcome or an uninvited partnership requires a strategic response to the resources provided. Although experienced teachers may hold a healthy and understandable skepticism when told that this next initiative is "the answer," such skepticism should not keep them from taking advantage of useful parts of a grant, such as a coaching framework or materials that can improve learning in their classrooms. Good teaching unfolds when teachers broker resources for their students, strengthen existing collaborations within their schools, and build relationships with individuals who can provide relevant support.

For example, a nonprofit preschool agency in the county established a formal partnership with one elementary school's preschool staff. The agency provided training and resources for preschool teachers—including curriculum materials and manipulatives for math and language literacy—and trained staff to supervise recreation time. The preschool funding formula initially excluded kindergarten and 1st grade teachers Jamilla and Eduardo, who had worked with the preschool team to establish program coherence. Together, the preschool and primary staff asked the program director to include the primary grades in the initiative. This potentially divisive partnership now supports a reliable sequence of learning experiences for children ages 3–8, strengthening early literacy development.

Looking at Teaching Through the Lens of Leadership

It takes courage to trust our intuition, observations, and interpretations and to take action in the face of outside pressures and little support. But teachers lead every day by teaching well, collaborating with others, conducting well-designed inquiry, and forming partnerships. We should not underestimate the powerful leadership role played by teachers who build relationships from their classrooms outward, thus transforming themselves, their students, their students' families, their colleagues, and their communities.

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