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My time as a district-level secondary language arts coordinator has provided numerous opportunities to facilitate program improvements. Writing new curriculum, implementing backward design, establishing an annual literacy summit (where both in- and out-of-district teachers present “best practices”), and promoting student choice are all initiatives that I’ve led. However, they were brought to fruition by teachers who shared a vision and who later facilitated districtwide implementation. For any change to occur in language arts, it must originate from a classroom need and have the support of teacher leaders who are able to carry it forward.

Teacher leader is a misleading term. It is a semantic pleonasm as illustrated in Chapter 1 of Start. Right. Now.: Teach and Lead for Excellence, which begins, “Teaching is leading; leading is teaching” (Whitaker et al.). Learning environments would cease to exist without a teacher leading the learning. The essence of our profession is leadership, yet many teachers do not see themselves as leaders beyond the classroom setting.

The term teacher leader generally describes teachers willing to take on responsibilities outside of their assigned teaching duties. The term (and position) has grown in popularity as research supports the importance of leadership in school improvement efforts. In 2014, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and the National Education Association partnered to create a list of teacher leader competencies established around three categories: instructional leadership, policy leadership, and association leadership. While multiple definitions of the term exist, Todd Whitaner et al. describe teacher leaders as “experts at teaching their students and experts at leading their students, as well as others in their school communities” (10).

All educational organizations need teachers willing to step forward and lead their colleagues. Nonetheless, teachers often feel overwhelmed with the duties of teaching, let alone leading. Any time I work with teachers, I hope to tap a potential teacher leader. Interestingly, when I approach teachers about a leadership role, they are almost always surprised. Charlotte Danielson discusses this phenomenon in Teacher Leadership That Strengthens Professional Practice, noting that “some teachers simply don’t see themselves as leaders and would never describe themselves using that word” (130). Valeri Heltbran termed this the “I am just a teacher” syndrome, pointing out that “maintaining a culture where ‘just a teacher’ states-of-mind prevail is a terrible waste of expertise, energy, and influence in the school community” (365). Building teachers’ confidence and helping them see their value is a crucial step in nurturing leadership.

In a profession whose organizational structure is described as “flat” (meaning there is little room for promotion outside of moving to administration), first-year teachers fill the same roles as colleagues with extensive experience (Danielson 14). This is, indeed, a “terrible waste of expertise.” Many experienced teachers do not pursue leadership roles because they lack the desire to become an administrator. Nor do they recognize their leadership potential from within the classroom. There are also teachers who find themselves disenfranchised later in their careers and assume the next step is moving to administration or leaving education entirely. It
is critical to the profession that strong teachers remain, not only in education generally but also in the classroom. To do this, opportunities to grow and contribute to the profession outside of administration must be identified and promoted.

Opportunities to Lead from the Classroom

Teachers can “lead from the classroom” by sharing their practice. Teachers ready to lead are confident in their knowledge and abilities as classroom teachers. They are also committed to continuous improvement and are willing to try new learning structures and lessons. When doing this, it is natural to share those ideas and outcomes with colleagues. Teachers willing to open their classrooms to peer observation will find an avenue for constructive feedback while simultaneously growing as a leader by modeling the vulnerability required to improve.

Mentoring a new teacher is a form of leadership. We all recall the fear of being a first-year teacher. Having experienced teachers willing to listen and guide novice teachers will help them significantly improve their methods. Mentoring has an immediate impact on teacher performance, teacher retention, and, ultimately, student learning.

Classroom teachers can exhibit leadership by assisting in curriculum writing. A well-crafted curriculum is dependent on the teachers who help create it. Teachers who understand their content and employ effective instructional practices are the key to developing effective curriculum materials. Additionally, such teachers become pivotal team members when they return to campus with their understanding of the new curriculum and the decisions made while developing that curriculum.

Teachers can lead by serving on campus or district committees. These committees are a teacher’s pathway to making administrators aware of classroom needs. An experienced teacher can provide rich and nuanced perspectives on a range of issues. They have witnessed the educational pendulum’s swing, and they have a deep understanding of what “works” and what doesn’t.

Teachers can lead by delivering professional development. Though many teachers are not comfortable making presentations in front of peers, delivering professional development is an enriching experience that allows others access to the best practices in the profession.

A teacher can become a leader by making presentations at conferences. Teachers often hesitate to submit conference proposals, assuming that no one will be interested in their work and that they have nothing new to offer. They fail to realize that practices that seem “common knowledge” to the presenter can be novel to others.

Leadership can be exhibited by running for office with local affiliations. Teacher leaders are needed to serve as voices that extend beyond the campus or district. Running for office or chairing a regional or state committee provides opportunities to network with other educators and build a professional learning community that will improve classroom practices.

Teachers can provide leadership by establishing an online presence. The digital age has afforded teachers the opportunity to lead beyond the walls of their school. When Twitter was founded in 2006, no one envisioned that it would one day become a favorite site for teacher collaboration and professional growth. Teachers can share ideas and resources and offer moral support through tweets and by participating in Twitter chats. Teacher blogs have also proliferated on the Internet. With a few keystrokes, teachers can connect and collaborate.

Even with these opportunities, teachers may choose to forgo leadership roles because of the immense demands already placed on their time—or due to fears their colleagues will see them as “putting on airs” (Danielson). These are valid concerns. Threatened teachers will often “ascribe the selection of others to favoritism, not capability” (Helterbran 367). There is no simple solution. Fortunately, teacher leaders—driven by a profound need to improve student learning—still emerge despite these conditions (Ackerman and Mackenzie).

I cannot do my job well without the support of teacher leaders. The principals I am fortunate to work alongside would heartily agree. The days of “turf wars” between administrators and teachers must end, and this is largely dependent on administrators’ realization that their jobs are not threatened by strong teachers whose assistance is critical (Danielson 129). When we embrace a leadership style that supports teacher growth and opportunities to lead, the organization as a whole improves (Hattie).
More teachers are needed to take on leadership roles. The challenge lies in motivating teachers to step forward despite the present obstacles. The solution is two-fold and rooted in the understanding that leadership is change management, both internal and external (Heath and Heath). Actions are necessary to reduce the known obstacles to teacher leadership, namely lack of time, lack of power, and a fear of colleagues’ responses to accepting leadership roles. Additionally, change initiatives will require those leading to spend more time describing the vision and engaging potential teacher leaders with a call to action.

In *Switch: How to Change When Change Is Hard*, Chip Heath and Dan Heath share the work of John Kotter and Dan Cohen (106). They contend that the key to negotiating change is to understand that change rarely follows the seemingly logical sequence of “ANALYZE-THINK-CHANGE.” Humans are much more emotional than they like to believe. This leads to the true, but often discounted, sequence for successful change: “SEE-FEEL-CHANGE.” Teacher leaders will not emerge simply from reading this article or the numerous books and articles on the subject; they will emerge as a result of seeing the human needs within their schools and feeling the innate drive to improve the situation.

Any significant change requires nothing short of a visceral emotional response. Administrators like me must provide the conditions to empower teachers to respond. We need to illustrate the importance of teacher leaders. We must make sure teachers feel the urgency of the situation. We must tell the story. Leadership in education will never be about money or fame. Education leadership is a heart activity, something one engages in because it truly matters. Any other motivating factor will not suffice. We must engage teachers’ hearts and highlight their immense value when they choose to lead from the classroom. Only then will we begin to make lasting improvements to English instruction.

**Works Cited**


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