Learner-Centered Teacher Leadership
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“That sounds great in theory, but I can’t do that in my school.” This is a common refrain from my graduate students—practicing teachers pursuing leadership credentials—in response to many of the leadership practices promoted in our classes. And I understand. Unlike when I began teaching high school English in West Baltimore in the early 1990s with no quarterly assessments or even a district curriculum, our profession has become regulated by national standards and accountability measures. Where does that leave room for teacher autonomy and leadership? And why should we care?

Under the traditional school leadership approach that most of us have experienced, administrators take a top-down, managerial approach to overseeing schools. That model, though, has never succeeded in countering the persistent achievement gaps that disproportionately affect children of color, children in poverty, emergent bilinguals, and linguistically diverse student populations. Top-down leadership leaves teachers feeling unheard, unheralded, and disempowered.

More recently, shared and distributed leadership models have become increasingly prominent. These approaches prioritize collective decision-making among teachers and administrators that remains focused on student growth. This is consistent with research that finds that building a community of trust in schools requires stakeholders to feel heard and respected, and teachers to feel included in decision-making (Bryk and Schneider 91).

Leading from the Classroom with a Learner-Centered Approach

However, as I’ve learned from my current graduate students, many of us work in schools that do not embody shared or distributed leadership. But leadership tasks can and should be undertaken by a wide variety of school professionals, including mentors, department chairs, and teachers. This is what I mean by “leading from the classroom”—that teachers have an essential voice and unique perspective to be leveraged in supporting the growth of students. What I have found in my work is that even traditional, top-down principals appreciate teachers’ genuine efforts toward student growth.

Teachers who lead from the classroom can support the creation of a learner-centered approach to leadership, which focuses on ensuring equitable opportunities for all students to participate in rigorous, meaningful, and differentiated learning experiences. While student outcomes are always the ultimate goal, too often our approaches to leadership and school improvement use the mechanism of evaluating teacher performance. This risks isolating teachers as individually blame-worthy for any lagging student progress. When we take a learner-centered approach, assessing and supporting student growth, we can more easily harness a sense of collective accountability and collaborative problem-solving among adults in schools. This is something any teacher can undertake, no matter the leadership culture of the school.

Equitable Opportunities for All Students

One powerful tool that teachers and school leaders alike can use to take a learner-centered approach
to leadership, particularly to address the needs of traditionally underserved students, is the equity audit (Skrla et al. 138). This is a tool—really, a set of questions—to gather information about teacher quality, programming, and achievement. Table 1 summarizes its components.

So, what do we do with this information? The goal of conducting an equity audit is to share the findings with a selected group of stakeholders who should collaborate not only in discussing the data’s meaning but also in devising and carrying out the next steps. A key to this process is to engage a facilitator who can navigate these conversations and avoid promoting deficit views of students or blaming teachers and parents. For example, principal Carol Corbett Burris describes her racially and socioeconomically diverse high school in the Rockville Centre School District, Long Island, New York, where Black and Latino/Latina students, poor students, and special education students were found to be overrepresented in low-track classes. Failure rates were higher in these classes, as were the occurrence of fights and other discipline problems. The school responded by gradually instituting full de-tracking, that is, eliminating all low-track classes, led by the English teachers. Since then, academic achievement results across students and content areas have been excellent. Burris explains, “The curriculum that used to be for ‘the best’ is now the ‘best curriculum for all’” (60).

Providing Rigorous, Meaningful, and Differentiated Learning Experiences

Teachers can also exhibit leadership in supporting high-quality learning opportunities by participating in collegial, non-evaluative classroom observations and feedback. A few of you may know what I’m describing, but I know to leadership, particularly to address the needs of traditionally underserved students, is the equity audit (Skrla et al. 138). This is a tool—really, a set of questions—to gather information about teacher quality, programming, and achievement. Table 1 summarizes its components.

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### Table 1. Equity Audit features, excerpted from Skrla et al., 2004

<table>
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<th>Equity category</th>
<th>Examples of what this category may include</th>
<th>Sample questions to ask</th>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher quality</td>
<td>• Level of education&lt;br&gt;• Years of experience&lt;br&gt;• Mobility (how long teachers have been at this school)&lt;br&gt;• Teaching within or outside of certification area</td>
<td>- Are there any patterns by which certain students have access to higher quality teachers and other students to lower quality?&lt;br&gt;- For example, are there differences in the characteristics of teachers who teach:&lt;br&gt;  • AP and honors vs. “regular” or intervention classes?&lt;br&gt;  • Lower vs. higher grade levels?&lt;br&gt;  • ELLs or language minority students vs. L1 speakers?</td>
</tr>
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<td>Programming</td>
<td>- Assignment of students into, for example:&lt;br&gt;  • gifted and talented/honors/AP or other accelerated courses&lt;br&gt;  • special education referrals and placements&lt;br&gt;  • remedial/intervention classes or pull-out services&lt;br&gt;  - Heterogeneous/tracked vs. homogeneous/inclusive organization of courses and school scheduling&lt;br&gt;  - School discipline procedures</td>
<td>- Are any students (especially language minority students or identifiable race/ethnic groups) disproportionately represented in particular courses or tracks?&lt;br&gt;- Are any student groups unable to participate in accelerated or specialty courses (for example, upper level arts or electives) because they occur during intervention/pull-out times?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student achievement</td>
<td>Disaggregating data based on more than just state and national standardized tests to include:&lt;br&gt;  • dropout/high school completion rates&lt;br&gt;  • SAT/ACT/AP scores&lt;br&gt;  • post-graduation plans</td>
<td>- Are these data proportionately represented according to the race, language, and SES demographics of the student population?</td>
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most are thinking, being observed is such a stressful experience: Why in the world would we want more scrutiny of our teaching? What I am suggesting is a more empowering, nontargeting experience in which we leverage the eyes, ears, and the expertise of our colleagues to explore how we might better support our students.

There are several keys to undertaking observation/feedback practices that promote a trusting environment and create safe spaces for this work to be productive, and I have included them in Table 2.

Navigating effective feedback conversations is complex but eminently learnable with practice; there are a number of resources my students have identified as helpful in developing these skills:

- Arthur L. Costa and Robert J. Garmston’s *Cognitive Coaching: A Foundation for Renaissance Schools*
- Jim Knight’s *Better Conversations: Coaching Ourselves and Each Other to Be More Credible, Caring, and Connected*
- Carla Finkelstein’s “Thank You So Much for the Truth!”

**What Teachers Can Do to Enact Learner-Centered Leadership**

Regardless of your current role, there are substantive ways you can take up leadership practices that help provide equitable opportunities for students.

Take an inquiry approach to equity.

Conduct an equity audit and examine the information you’ve gathered. Launch an inquiry group with interested stakeholders to explore the questions that arise. Analyzing the data with questions from a stance of curiosity can help these conversations proceed productively rather than defensively. Try to find at least one small change for which you can advocate. For example, after conducting an equity audit, one of my graduate students noticed a striking inequality in the distribution of teacher

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**TABLE 2. Recommendations for Nonjudgmental Observations and Feedback**

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<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>Examples of what this can look like/sound like: You might say to a colleague . . .</th>
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<tr>
<td>Make your own practice public first: invite a colleague in to observe before seeking to observe others.</td>
<td>“I’ve been struggling with having the same handful of students always volunteering to contribute orally in class, so I’m trying out some partner sharing and small-group techniques prior to class discussions. But it’s too hard for me to get around the room to listen in to everyone. I’d love your help in getting a sense of whether these new strategies are really working, and especially if my ELL students are feeling more comfortable sharing in these smaller forums.”</td>
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<td>When setting up observations with colleagues, allow them to articulate their own goals for improving student growth, and provide feedback only that relates to those goals.</td>
<td>“You’ve said you want to increase student participation in discussions. During the discussion portion of class today, I noticed that in some cases you called on students to speak and other times students jumped in without being recognized. Overall, 9 out of the 24 students participated during these 10 minutes.”</td>
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<td>Stay focused primarily on student growth rather than teacher performance.</td>
<td>“As we agreed before the lesson, I scripted students’ words as much as possible. Let’s look at this document together. What do you notice; what stands out to you? What do their responses tell you about what they do or don’t understand about the text at this point? Is there anyone whose response surprised you today?”</td>
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<td>Be nonjudgmental: Avoid making unprompted suggestions and ask questions from a place of inquiry and curiosity.</td>
<td>“Was today’s discussion typical for your class?” “How do you want students to gain entry into discussions?” “Is it important to you that all students participate orally every day?” “For you, what is the ideal balance of teacher talk vs. student talk time in class discussions?”</td>
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<td>Maintain open and transparent communication, and be willing to model this yourself.</td>
<td>“When you were in my class last week, I think it made me especially anxious to see you typing on your laptop during the lesson. Do you think it might work next time if you audio record the lesson, and then I could transcribe it afterward?”</td>
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experience across grade levels at her school. Specifically, the pre-kindergarten team contained one conditionally certified teacher and two long-term substitutes, while the kindergarten team was staffed with three experienced teachers. After her analysis of academic measures showed students leaving preK with minimal growth, she recommended to her principal that the staffing of these grades be re-ranged “to move teachers around so that there is a balance of experienced and inexperienced teachers on each grade so that modeling and team planning can occur as well as sharing of old and new ideas.” This change has now been implemented at her school.

Launch observation/feedback cycles. Begin by inviting a colleague to your classroom to provide non-evaluative feedback focused on students’ needs; offer to go into colleagues’ classrooms to “lend a hand,” or suggest, for example, “I’m often wishing I could have another smart adult in the classroom to help assess what students are thinking and learning. If I offered to come into your classroom, how could I best help you do that?” In reflecting on observing a colleague, one of my graduate students wrote: “I was hesitant observing her and giving feedback because I did not want to offend her. The opposite ended up happening. All our talks turned into conversations about students and the best way to get them to the places they need to be. These were the deepest conversations that I have ever had about education, and they felt right.” This experience exemplifies the value of non-evaluative observations and feedback to support collegial, intellectually rigorous reflections on our practice.

Conclusion

Teachers’ experiences and insights provide them with unique resources as leaders in school efforts toward equity. If we are to serve all students effectively, we need to be change agents both in and outside of the classroom. Leadership focused on achievement for all students starts with us.

Works Cited


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