

Epilogue

Three overarching ideas emanate from our study of teacher-leaders and the writing of this book: a reframing of teacher leadership, network participation as a foundation for leadership, and the importance of learning from both academic research and teachers' knowledge.

REFRAMING TEACHER LEADERSHIP

An important part of our collaboration with the teacher-leaders in our project centered on reframing a definition of leadership that reflected their core principles about students, teaching, learning, and professional development, as well as their approaches to working with others. Through the vignettes and a series of focus group conversations, together, we defined teacher leadership in a way that emphasizes a focus on students, collaboration with teachers, and a commitment to ongoing learning.

Some authors assumed, in the beginning, that leadership meant holding positional authority, working hierarchically, having all the answers, and being solely in charge. As we worked together, we learned that teacher leadership reflects several core principles that are exemplified in their work:

- Advocating what's right for students;
- Opening the classroom door and going public with teaching;
- Working "alongside" teachers and leading collaboratively;
- Taking a stand; and
- Learning and reflecting on practice as a teacher and leader.

During the focus group interviews that we conducted with 28 of the vignette authors at the final writing retreat, these teacher-leaders articulated what it means to be a leader and how they see themselves as leaders. For some, these were new insights, informed through writing and conversation about the vignettes; for others, this thinking extended their previous reflection on their work as leaders.

Advocating What's Right for Students

Teacher-leaders put forward a vision for education grounded in what is best for students. Their vision grows out of their day-to-day experiences in their own classrooms as well as their understanding of research and other professional reading about excellent teaching practice. These teacher-leaders read broadly about a wide range of topics, including but not limited to, teaching writing and literacy, integrating writing in the content areas, learning theory, school change, and the like. One veteran high school teacher reflected,

But for me, going back to the classroom is the thing. That's the real thing. . . . I want to give them [my students] everything I have . . . and to open the door for them. . . . That's the pivot for me. And that's what gives power to the teacher-leader. (Teacher, June 2006)

We see this commitment to high-quality teaching and learning woven throughout the vignettes collected here. Austen Reilley (Chapter 1) showed how her girls' afterschool writing club built middle school girls' passion for writing and developed their self-confidence. Her positive experiences with the club led to schoolwide changes that improved opportunities to learn to write for all children in the school. Deidré Farmbry (Chapter 3) illustrated how she carried her commitments as a teacher into positions with formal authority—as a principal and district administrator. She worked hard to keep from “getting lost” while attending to issues of safety, racism, and governance and to keep her focus on improving teaching and learning for students.

Opening the Classroom Door, Going Public With Teaching

Sharing one's teaching, and the successes of one's students, serves as a powerful mode of teacher leadership. One vignette author explained her motivation:

You believe in something and you want to spread it, so even if you just spread it to one person, you feel like you're making a difference. Whereas there are teachers in my school who I think are great teachers, but all they do is go and close their door. (Teacher, June 2006)

Christy James (Chapter 3) used her position as a master teacher to make visible the ways in which she integrates reading and writing into her day-to-day social studies curriculum. She opened her classroom door gently—first

helping her colleagues see why her approach mattered, then modeling one strategy at a time during meetings, and finally making an open invitation to stop by her classroom. Following her example, her colleagues opened up their own teaching, sharing their efforts to integrate reading and writing during monthly department meetings. Similarly, Lucy Ware (Chapter 4) took advantage of opportunities to coteach with colleagues and collaborate with them to support elementary students' development as writers. She not only gave away her own ideas, she championed the work of her colleagues. Going public with teaching means both sharing one's own practice *and* inviting colleagues to share.

Working Alongside Teachers, Leading Collaboratively

The teacher-leaders used a variety of phrases to characterize the collaborative, behind-the-scenes nature of their work: "working alongside," "grass-roots," "collaborative," "teacher-to-teacher," "quiet," "behind the scenes," and "helping people find their strengths." For them, leadership takes the form of doing what needs to be done and working hard both in and out of their classrooms. Teacher leadership is egalitarian and respectful of teachers' knowledge. Many times it goes unacknowledged:

It helps you to see the value in supporting your colleagues, so that you don't have to get the credit. Because if you help someone else and they do a wonderful job and they get accolades, it makes you feel good because you helped support them. (Teacher, June 2006)

Those who moved into positions of formal leadership wrestled with how to maintain their commitment to collaboration with teachers while fulfilling expectations for formal leadership. Ronni Tobman Michelen (Chapter 2) characterized this as an internal conversation among three voices—teacher, writing project teacher-consultant, and vice principal. She showed how she carefully thought through inviting teachers to colead professional development sessions.

Taking a Stand

While the vignette authors highlighted the behind-the-scenes nature of their leadership, they also acknowledged the importance of staying true to their principles and standing up for what they believe. One person defined a teacher-leader as a "person who doesn't avoid struggle, somebody who just takes risks, someone who tries to expand justice, guide others" (retired teacher, focus group interview, June 2006). Christy James (Chapter 3) portrayed how

she worked to keep a focus on integrating reading and writing in the social studies curriculum even after the district decided that all middle schools should implement a test preparation program for the 5 months leading up to the state social studies test. While James could have complied with the new mandates or hidden her department's true work, she instead chose to be direct with the district administrator. She described what they were doing, explained why they were sticking with an integrated approach, and invited the administrator to see the work in action. Her approach created space to do what was best for teachers and students.

Learning and Reflecting on Practice as a Teacher and a Leader

Finally, teacher-leaders constantly seek to broaden their knowledge base. They read widely and stay informed of new research and professional literature related to their field. They reflect on their teaching and on the work that they do with their peers. They constantly seek to improve their teaching and leadership practice. They emphasize that they do not have all the answers and often turn to others. In the focus groups, several people connected this learning stance to their involvement in the Writing Project:

I think another very important facet of the Writing Project is that it is research-based and we read together. Because we have that understanding of the importance of the research, we individually and collectively seek out new ways of doing things and staying informed, staying on the cutting edge, not accepting the status quo, “just because we’ve done it this way for so long” attitude. (School-based literacy coach, June 2006)

Learning and reflection thread through the vignettes. Mimi Dyer (Chapter 3) learned how to be a more collaborative and effective literacy leader through failing as a department chair and then taking a step back to rethink her approach. Deidré Farmbry (Chapter 3), Christy James (Chapter 3), and Austen Reilley (Chapter 1) demonstrated how they turned to professional literature and used it to build their own knowledge base as well as build the capacity of others. Yarda Leflet (Chapter 1), Paul Epstein, Kim Larson, and Ronni Tobman Michelen (all Chapter 3) illustrated how they sought to develop the leadership capacities of others and in the process grew as leaders themselves.

These vignettes illustrate in teacher-leaders' own voices what teacher leadership is and how it grows. For these authors, teacher leadership connects to teachers' core commitments, respects collaborative and quiet approaches to working with others, and emphasizes the necessity of continuing to learn. These core principles are manifest in the way these teacher-leaders

write about and see their work. They are adamant about standing up for students and taking a stand when they think that the pedagogy and the practices they use are more effective than those proposed by policy makers. And they are constant in their position that collaborative work and working side by side with peers is a powerful way to lead. And finally, they feel responsible for facilitating opportunities for teachers to open up their classroom work and examine it publicly. This collaborative and advocacy stance characterizes their definition of teachers who lead.

NETWORK PARTICIPATION: A FOUNDATION FOR LEADERSHIP

While the vignettes focus on a slice of each author's life as a teacher-leader, many writers described explicitly how participation in the National Writing Project served as a foundation for their work. Of the 31 vignette authors, 23 wrote explicitly about how the Writing Project influences their work as leaders. In addition, the vignette authors rated their Writing Project experience as influencing and informing their work in 98% of the positions they held during their careers following their participation in the Invitational Institute.

They talked about how they learned to build collaborative work, explaining that they expected to have conflict but knew they had many colleagues whom they could call upon to help them work through their problems. Many referred to the fact that NWP members read research and other literature so that they can keep on broadening their perspective. Others showed how the group processes that they had learned in the Writing Project—writing together, sharing what they had written with others, feeling comradeship in going public with their stories, teaching each other—became part of how they worked with others. Still others described collaborating with Writing Project colleagues to figure out how to address conflicting demands and to continue to grow as teachers and as leaders.

Although our project is set in the Writing Project, it may indeed be the case that other networks give people opportunities to learn apart from their daily context and to experience more collaborative and supportive ways of working. Because such opportunities support rather than thwart social learning, the practices encountered seem to become a part of the repertoire of teachers who lead. Belonging to a network that focuses on strong teacher participation with norms of inquiry helps socialize teachers into thinking (and acting) in ways better aligned with the larger goals of continuous improvement of practice, and provides opportunity for practice in how to organize these experiences for others. In many ways, these teacher-leaders, both through their actions and through their writing, help build teacher knowledge of how to lead.

LEARNING FROM BOTH ACADEMIC RESEARCH AND TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE

As we read academic research and the teacher-leaders' vignettes alongside each other, we noticed how each called our attention to different things. Academic research knowledge typically prizes the general and conceptual, while teacher knowledge emphasizes the experiential, complex, and contextualized dailiness of the work. Academic research helps us understand how central leadership challenges have been studied across time and in different settings, and thus helped us pose new questions about the vignettes and situate what we were learning in a larger history. The vignettes (and teacher knowledge more generally) give us a picture of the social, intellectual, and emotional story of how human beings nuance and challenge these frames. Both help us understand how teachers learn to lead; both help educators take hold of ideas and contribute to developing the knowledge base.

Identity

Academic research teaches us that identity is not fixed; it is inherently social; and there is room for change. It shows that adopting an identity shapes individuals' sense of agency. The vignettes make visible how these ideas work for teacher-leaders. We see Elizabeth Davis (Chapter 1) create the conditions for her students to develop a sense of agency. Further, the vignettes illustrate the struggles in this process. Austen Reilley (Chapter 1) wonders whether she should be a teacher, but as girls become more confident and boys more proficient writers her belief was strengthened that she could make a difference. Similarly, Linda Tatman (Chapter 1) questioned whether she would be able to build community with the teachers who were her Master of Arts in Teaching students in the same way she had accomplished this with her high school students.

The vignettes also show us how teachers often hold on to and draw on their identities as teachers as they move into leadership roles. Yarda Leflet (Chapter 1) engaged in both internal and external struggle and questioning as she moved from high school teacher to assistant principal: Why is the behavior of my peers so different now that I am an assistant principal? How can I use what I know from teaching and the Writing Project in my new position?

Collegiality and Community

The research on how to build collegiality and community describes how collegiality is made up of such things as building a shared language, planning and designing materials together, and teaching and observing one another.

The vignettes reveal what collegueship looks like, how it is organized, and what strategies are used; they also show how teachers develop their skills to build community.

Paul Epstein (Chapter 2) highlighted how he started by informally collaborating with his peers, encouraging them to try new practices for teaching writing and to consider leading peers. He showed how he and his colleague drew on Writing Project practices to develop a sense of community in a study group that teachers had previously seen as complying with a mandate.

Kim Larson (Chapter 2) showed how developing community among teachers could translate to other professional settings. Academic research aptly describes what teachers do when they become colleagues, and teacher knowledge rounds out the practical means for building collegueship in particular contexts. The vignettes also teach us new lessons about developing the skills, knowledge, and experience to build community.

Conflict

Conflict theorists teach us how they conceptualize conflict, exploring how stereotypes and power contribute to it. They also highlight that knowledge, skills, and strategies can be developed to help people learn from and productively resolve conflict. Teacher-leaders who experienced conflict described particular situations in their context where conflicts arose and the different ways they handled it. Mimi Dyer (Chapter 3) failed to resolve her philosophical conflicts with her department, but through reflection became more skillful at building community and resolving similar conflicts. Deidré Farmbry (Chapter 3) figured out how to clear away the myths that were seen as absolutes in a school district that had denied African American students a proper and equitable education.

Again we see the general, theoretical, and conceptual nature of academic research teaching us about conflict and the variety of approaches people have taken to understanding how to resolve it. We learn from teacher knowledge how teacher-leaders think about conflict, and the nuances of how teacher-leaders learn to negotiate, handle, and resolve particular clashes over roles, relationships, prejudice, pedagogy, and power in their particular contexts.

Practice

In the past several decades, researchers have sought to understand how people learn through analyzing their own practice. Ideas like the “reflective practitioner” and “taking an inquiry stance” have in many respects become accepted knowledge in education. Social theories of learning have begun to infuse the literature, teaching us how people in organizations where jobs are

nonroutine, changeable, and complex learn from one another in communities of practice.

The vignettes reveal how teacher-leaders learn how to become more effective through their practice. Lucy Ware (Chapter 4) realized that she could support deeper change by leaving her district coaching position and returning to the classroom. Anne Aliverti (Chapter 4) learned how to shape her support for each new teacher she mentored to specifically meet their questions and needs; in doing so, she both drew on her own classroom experience and sought to draw on a wider range of resources including other teachers and professional reading.

The role of reflection also becomes evident, as Shayne Goodrum (Chapter 4) learned from literacy team meetings that prioritized socializing rather than professional learning and figured out how to create a more effective learning community for the middle school literacy coaches in her district.

Finally, the vignettes illustrate how teacher-leaders seek to formally draw on and share teacher knowledge to improve teaching and learning. Scott Peterson (Chapter 4) described his collaboration with another veteran teacher to create practices that bridge the written standards and curriculum with the real world of the classroom. Academic research and the vignettes together help reveal the subtle, often tacit dimensions of how people learn from practice and help expand the knowledge base of teaching in the process.

LEARNING FROM PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

Our analysis of how teachers learn to lead joins the growing chorus of others working to show how teachers and researchers can collaborate to deepen our knowledge about teaching, learning, and leadership. We have made an effort to build knowledge from both academic research and teacher knowledge—thus enriching both. We show both the general and the particular, the conceptual and the practical, the universal and the local, the theory of researchers and the theory of those who practice. Each in its own way contributes to the knowledge of how teachers learn to lead. Our work is only a beginning, but we think it constitutes an important step in the right direction: in creating the conditions for collaboration between teachers and researchers, in building on teacher knowledge, and in finding a place where both academic knowledge and teacher knowledge enhance a deeper understanding of how teachers learn to lead.