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Teachers, Writers, Leaders

Teachers in the National Writing Project reflect on the need for conviction and community in fostering change.

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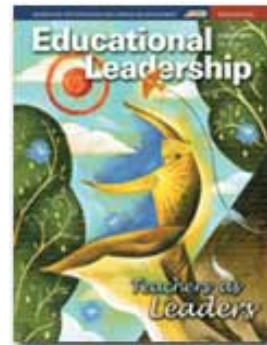
It has become commonplace to talk about how globalization is changing both the skills required to thrive in the modern economy and education in the United States. But the discussion bears repeating because it helps us understand why teacher leadership is central to reform. A broad consensus is emerging among leaders and the public that writing and strong academic skills are crucial to success in the workplace (National Commission on Writing, 2005). Three-quarters of U.S. citizens recently surveyed believe that there is a “greater need to write well to succeed than 20 years ago” (Belden Russonello and Stewart Research and Communications, 2007). Along with this increased accountability for teaching writing skills, teachers face greater pressures for overall school accountability.

Changes in education and the economy spell a critical role for teacher leaders: to guide their colleagues in strengthening the teaching of writing. But despite much research documenting the roles that teacher leaders play in reform (see, for example, Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Lieberman & Miller, 2004), we have much to learn about the nuances of how teacher leaders take on influential roles and are sustained in this work. The National Writing Project (NWP) recently looked more closely into how individual teacher leaders help their peers face the needs of a changing society, especially in the crucial area of writing.

NWP's Vignette Study

The National Writing Project is a collaborative effort of teachers to improve writing and the teaching of writing in the United States. In 2003, with several colleagues, we initiated a set of studies about teacher leaders associated with the National Writing Project, including a study in which teachers wrote vignettes about their leadership journeys.¹ We explored whether teachers' participation in one of the National Writing Project's invitational summer institutes, along with ongoing connection to a local network of teacher leaders, enabled them to lead in various contexts.²

We knew that the social practices that participating teachers engage in—such as honoring teacher knowledge, guiding reflection on teaching through reflection on learning, and turning ownership over to learners—are a key part of their leadership. The summer institute often



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represents the first time a teacher has gone public with her or his practice, worked in a writing group, or shared and critiqued writing (Lieberman & Wood, 2003). Many teachers describe these opportunities for collegial learning and teaching as starkly different from their experiences with staff development in their own schools. We wanted to know more about how teacher leaders learn to work with fellow teachers—and help their peers meet the challenge of creating stellar writers for the coming decades.

Realizing the difficulties people sometimes experience in describing how they lead, we decided to elicit teachers' reflections through their writing. We asked each selected teacher leader to write a *vignette*, a 6- to 10-page narrative about a period during which he or she acted as a leader and gained insight related to leadership. Site directors nominated teacher leaders who were professionally active, reflective, and comfortable writing about their work. We selected 31 of these nominees, all of whom held leadership positions in their schools, districts, states, or writing-project sites. We focus here on the insights of 10 teacher leaders whose vignettes describe working for change inside their own schools (see "Ten Snapshots of Leadership," p. 44–45) and consider the common challenges and features of success that these reflective teachers describe.

How Leaders Earn Recognition

Some researchers (Little, 1995) note a clash between the collaborative style of teacher leaders and the bureaucratic norms of most schools. Many of these teacher leaders confirmed that there are professional risks involved in leading within their own schools. An educator who makes her practice public risks being perceived as bragging or working against the egalitarian culture. Those whose practice runs against the norm may be seen as odd ducks—until students' accomplishments show results. Inviting peers to critically examine their own teaching practice can lead to defensiveness and conflict. As Paul Epstein noted,

It is one thing to stand up in front of strangers . . . and ask teachers to try something they may not have tried, to show them ways to teach writing, maybe even to ask them to write and share something. . . . It is quite another thing to get up in front of your coworkers and tell them they should teach differently.

As facilitators guided teacher consultants through a process of writing their vignettes during two retreats, we found that even claiming an identity as a teacher leader seemed to carry an element of risk. When we introduced the idea of writing about leadership, many claimed that they were not leaders. Several defined leadership as "telling people what to do." Although some teachers readily identified themselves as leaders, none described their work as authoritarian or hierarchical, and many wrestled with how to portray their collaborative approach to leadership. When the group redefined leadership as making a commitment to students, taking responsibility for contributing beyond one's own classroom, and working collaboratively, teachers showed greater comfort in claiming the mantle of leadership.

In describing their experiences, these teachers stressed that true teacher leaders demonstrate a strong moral commitment to doing what is right for children. Some teacher leaders show a passion for working toward social justice, which leads them to devise teaching strategies and

build alliances that become the impetus for change. Elizabeth C. Davis, building on her lifelong work as a civil rights activist, engaged her middle school students in studying the history of their own school, which introduced them to the landmark antisegregation case *Brown v. Board of Education*. Their investigations led to political activism that improved the condition of their own school and others in Washington, D.C. Davis explained,

I continue my activism as a teacher by modeling the power of writing and building alliances, as well as opening up opportunities for students to advocate for themselves. A part of my dream is to make my classroom a laboratory for equity and social justice.

Similarly, C. Lynn Jacobs advocated for her colleagues' chance to choose which curriculum they would use as professionals working toward what they considered ideal outcomes for their students. Jacobs described leadership as taking a stand:

At the school site level, I was driven to stand up for my beliefs and in so doing became recognized as a leader. . . .What I think now is that leadership is about taking a stand and saying what we know.

The vignette writers emphasized that leadership must be earned. Many noted how they received recognition from colleagues for their commitment to children, high-quality teaching, and willingness to share ideas with coworkers who turned to them for advice. After Paul Epstein facilitated a schoolwide benchmark-setting process, teachers from all grade levels sought him out informally for advice on how to teach writing. He wrote of the ripple effect his leadership had at his school:

Ruffner Elementary School began to see itself and be seen as a school that was strong in writing. Writing lined the hallways throughout the building, interspersed with art. . . . [Now] teachers who are hesitant to teach writing are getting encouragement from those with more experience.

The Primacy of Building Community

Some researchers advocate thinking about a school as a community of those who share values, sentiments, and beliefs (Sergiovanni, 1994). The teachers in our study shared this focus on relationships as an important means for improving teaching and learning, and they described how they worked collaboratively alongside colleagues.

Addressing Problems Collectively

Leaders identify problems that can best be addressed through collective action and then involve others in finding solutions. The vignette authors worked hard to build a common understanding of the learning challenges facing their students. Making schoolwide problems visible—from a gender gap in writing to a school's substandard physical condition— opened the door for teacher leaders to engage their peers in removing barriers to learning.

Nancy King Mildrum, for example, helped colleagues at her elementary school realize that the lack of challenge for the school's brightest students was a problem that begged for a solution.

She led teachers in creating an enrichment program, which now provides opportunities for all learners as well as academically gifted students. As she explained,

I noticed a missing piece in the system and I was curious. I educated myself, I experimented publicly, and I brought others into the process. . . . All of the backstage work results in children who look forward to going to school on the days that have enrichment.

Austen Reilley believed her school should act to address the achievement gap between boys and girls on state writing assessments. She shared research on single-gender classrooms with her middle school's counselor and principal and got permission to pilot a program in her own classroom teaching boys and girls separately using different strategies. Her all-boys class showed such powerful results that every grade in her school now includes single-gender classes.

Creating Forums for Shared Learning

These teacher leaders devised ways to bring their colleagues together to learn. For example, Cecilia Carmack had all students write to a schoolwide prompt so that teachers could together analyze their students' writing and use what they learned to plan instruction. Carmack first led teachers in rewording the state's scoring rubric to make it more student-, teacher-, and parent-friendly. She spent hours talking one-on-one with teachers, reassuring them that their willingness to make their teaching public would ultimately benefit students. When grade-level teaching teams started to score writing, both teachers' work and students' work were marked with code names so that teachers could focus on students' strengths and needs as writers rather than on judgments about one another's teaching. With scored papers in front of them, teachers together began shaping the next five months of instruction.

Similarly, Christine Wegmann persuaded her middle school social studies colleagues that "reading and writing belonged in every classroom for every student every day." At department meetings, she modeled strategies from her own classroom, and teachers planned how they would use that strategy the next week.

Both Carmack and Wegmann drew on the social practices routinely used at National Writing Project sites. Wegmann's actions also show the power of standing up for a teaching philosophy. First she persuaded her teaching colleagues that a literacy focus was central to their curriculum; then she refused to shift course when the district decided to return to a more traditional, content-only strategy. She asserted,

It became clear to me that rather than explaining the district's waffling to my teachers, I would have to demonstrate my teachers' transformation to the district. Ending our literacy focus simply wasn't an option for me or my department.

Some leaders shared cautionary tales about what happened when they slipped into more traditional authoritarian roles. Mimi Dyer was hired as a high school English department chair to "fix" the teaching of writing. Emboldened by her passion for effective writing instruction, and convinced that her colleagues would be thrilled with her ideas, she made unilateral changes in the curriculum. After two years the members of her department fought for her removal.

Ultimately, Dyer came to understand that she had not built community nor had she drawn on the strengths of her colleagues.

Celebrating Others' Contributions

Recognizing the expertise of other teachers is a central tenet of these teachers' philosophies of leadership. Christine Wegmann championed her coworkers' integration of literacy into social studies by confidently inviting her district administrator—who advocated test preparation over a literacy focus—to visit her colleagues' classrooms. Lynne Dorfman invited other faculty members whose students wrote frequently in writers' notebooks to share students' writing during the school's staff development meetings. By spotlighting others' work, she showed that all teachers can teach writing effectively.

Navigating School Cultures

Receiving recognition from peers as a “go-to person” is key to teacher leadership, the vignettes show. Most of these teachers held an ancillary role, such as literacy coach, which provided extra time to work with teachers. However, these roles appeared to be of a different order from more formal positions such as principal, assistant principal, or district literacy specialist, which can interfere with collegiality.

Lucy Ware contrasted her experiences as a district literacy specialist and a 3rd grade language arts teacher. When working as a district representative, Ware encountered suspicion from teachers, who initially viewed her as a spy for the administration rather than a “real” teacher. When she returned to teaching, she was again seen as a “real” teacher and could more easily share ideas with others.

Virtually all of these leaders continued teaching at least part time while spearheading their efforts toward change. The fact that their ancillary roles came without traditional administrative duties (especially evaluating teachers) helped them cut through potential mistrust and work effectively with their peers.

Leaning on Community

Even as they fostered improvement in their schools, these teacher leaders simultaneously cultivated their own teaching practice. By enriching their teaching skills, the teacher leaders grew in their abilities to support colleagues, increasing both the knowledge that they could share with fellow teachers and their understanding of the challenges that their peers faced. Their daily experiences of guiding peers taught these leaders how to help fellow teachers “own” their teaching—how to reshape new ideas as their own, overcome fears of being exposed as a fraud, and renew their commitment to children.

Participation in the National Writing Project supported these leaders in learning how to work with peers and gaining the confidence to do so. Encouraged to work collaboratively and go public with their successes, they adopted a stance of being both leaders and learners. As they returned to their schools, they re-created the social organization of learning that they had tasted at the National Writing Project's summer institute, establishing similar opportunities to learn together and take collaborative action.

In their leadership, these professionals drew on the community of the National Writing Project, which renewed their excitement for learning and taught them that they could continually improve their own practice as well as others'. Maybe that's the ultimate lesson of learning to lead.

Ten Snapshots of Leadership

Each of these teachers participated in a summer institute of the National Writing Project and has remained an active part of the network. We highlight here the results of the leadership effort that each teacher wrote about in the vignette composed for our study.

Building Capacity

In 2005–06, 4th grade teacher *Cecilia Carmack* served as a teacher on special assignment for her district one day a week, while continuing to teach in the classroom. At her Washington State elementary school, Carmack spurred development of a schoolwide writing assessment, engaged teachers in analyzing students' writing, and facilitated grade-level meetings at which teachers together identified possible approaches for teaching writing.

Leadership for Social Action

Elizabeth Davis, a 32-year veteran teacher, engaged her District of Columbia middle school students in a series of social action projects. Students learned that their school had been part of one of the cases considered along with *Brown v. Board of Education*. They also successfully advocated for their school building to be renovated rather than torn down.

Fostering Teacher Collaboration

Lynne R. Dorfman works full time as a literacy coach/writing extension teacher in an intermediate school in Pennsylvania. Beginning in 2004, she took advantage of a districtwide focus on literacy to spur all teachers and students to keep writers' notebooks. Dorfman facilitated weekly professional development with the entire faculty and invited other teachers to share their own and their students' writing.

Learning from "Failed" Leadership

English teacher *Mimi Dyer's* narrative described her "failed" attempt at leading a Georgia high school's English department. In her first year as department head, she made three major curricular changes: incorporating more world literature, changing the approach to vocabulary instruction, and asking students to keep electronic portfolios of their writing. These decisions went against the pedagogical approaches of vocal members of her department, and department members petitioned to have her replaced. Dyer used the experience to rethink her approach

to leadership.

Creating a Professional Learning Community

As a Title I reading specialist at an elementary school in West Virginia, *Paul Epstein* worked to improve the teaching of writing and raise student achievement on state writing exams, launched a quarterly student writing anthology, mentored other teachers, and started a professional learning community in which teachers read professional literature and turn to one another to strengthen their teaching.

Advocating Teacher-Developed Curriculum

C. Lynn Jacobs has taught for 14 years. As her California high school's English Language Development department chair, Jacobs persuaded the district to continue using her department's teacher-developed curriculum rather than adopting the district's newly chosen textbook series wholesale.

Crafting Challenge for Gifted Students

In 1987, *Nancy King Mildrum* saw that the brightest students in her 4th grade class were not being fully supported and challenged. She created an enrichment program at her 700-student, K–8 school in Vermont, a program that now employs four enrichment teachers.

Ripple-Effective Leadership

Austen Reilley launched a single-gender education option in her Kentucky middle school. She began by creating an after-school girls' writing club. The club's success spurred her to research single-gender education and propose that her school pilot single-gender classes.

Effecting Change Teacher to Teacher

Lucy Ware simultaneously taught her own 3rd grade class at her Pennsylvania elementary school, team taught reading and language arts in a 2nd grade classroom, and provided literacy instruction to 1st graders. She facilitated deep changes in the teaching of writing by coteaching, collaboratively developing teaching units, and highlighting the good work of her peers and their students. As Ware put it, "I give away everything—my process, ideas, and suggestions—and it is reciprocal."

Rules Worth Breaking

Christine Wegmann served as a 7th grade social studies master teacher at her South Carolina middle school. She combined full-time classroom responsibilities with leading her department to integrate reading and writing into their social studies curriculum. Wegmann helped teachers defend the new literacy focus of their social studies curriculum from her district's call for return to a test-preparation focus.

Endnotes

¹ This research also included NWP's Legacy Study, which followed the careers of 2,114 individuals who participated in National Writing Project summer institutes between 1974 and 1994.

² Through the National Writing Project's professional development programs, teachers in all subject areas and at all grade levels learn strategies for helping students become accomplished writers and learners. In 2005–06, nearly 12,000 teacher leaders prepared through this model provided leadership to their school communities. The NWP model begins with an annual four-week summer institute, held at each of the 14 writing-project sites, led by university faculty and K–12 teacher leaders. Teachers demonstrate effective practices, study research, and strengthen their own writing practice. They then take their expertise in teaching writing to schools and districts in their region. For more information, visit www.nwp.org.

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