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LEADING WITHOUT PERMISSION

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Taking responsibility for what really matters to us is the definition of leadership, according to Weissglass (2009). If we accept this definition, then leadership is something that can be nurtured in teachers from the very beginning of their careers. Leadership isn't something separate and distinct from all the other aspects of the craft that we're expected to develop; it is an attribute of our work, just as collaboration, inquiry, reflection, pedagogy, and content knowledge are.

There is an egalitarian streak in the teaching profession. We often chafe at attempts to rank us and are skeptical of positions that grant us special privileges or power over our colleagues. I believe that by developing our own leadership, we can transcend the hierarchical nature of school systems. We don't need permission to be leaders.

One important way to achieve this is through action research. Action research is a way for teachers to look closely at a specific aspect of their practice of their choosing, in order to gain a deeper understanding of it. The methods inherent in action research support inquiry and reflection, using the teacher's classroom work as data. Action research is personal, intensive, and long-term, essential qualities for purposeful professional development.

Through action research, we invite others to join us in building relationships that promote collaboration. When we quietly and thoughtfully pursue our ideas together, we don't have to wait for permission to be leaders. "Teacher leadership is less a matter of according trusted leaders responsibility for important issues than of ensuring that all teachers are given ownership of a responsibility about which they care deeply" (Barth, 1988, p.139).

A perceived obstacle to creating action research projects is the time they require. Teachers always worry about not having enough time to accomplish many of the things they think are important. So the question becomes, Is our own growth as teachers not worthy of our time? That's why the action research must be personal (that is, defined by the teacher) and purposeful, so the time spent is seen as worthwhile. If carefully crafted, action research creates energy, an essential element for teaching and leadership.

I often wonder if my work with teachers and faculties inspires them to see themselves as agents of their own change and of leadership. I frequently hear protests

about leadership. One middle school teacher recently said to me, “I don’t want to be a leader. I just want to be a teacher.” When I tried to encourage another teacher to accept a leadership role in her school, she responded, “Robin, do you know that leadership is code for doing all the [stuff] that principals don’t want to do?”

In my work with coaches, I often hear about their frustrations with their colleagues who are not responsive to them. In an attempt to move teachers into leadership roles like coaching, well-intentioned principals try to select the best and brightest and offer them these positions, which often causes resentment from other staff members who wonder why they were not chosen to share their expertise with colleagues. “Most teachers are unresponsive to top-down efforts to improve their instruction through administratively created teacher leadership positions” (Wasley, 1991, p. 160).

This leads me to wonder why teachers’ voices are rarely a part of the decision-making process when it comes to leadership roles. Teachers who are put into leadership roles by the principal are often presumed to be experts. In my experience, the truly inspired masters of teaching don’t see themselves as experts—they see themselves as learners. These leaders are less interested in sharing their expertise than in nurturing efficacy in others. And by taking a learner’s stance, these same leaders exemplify the humility necessary for successful leadership because they’re always open to the ideas of others. A coach who is capable of inspiring teachers to reflect deeply on their lessons contributes to those teachers’ effectiveness, which promotes a capacity for leadership.

In order to get a sense of their thinking about leading and teaching, I asked 32 colleagues in a variety of roles for their definitions of leadership and the attributes needed by a teacher to take on a leadership role. (My research was conducted via email; see acknowledgements.) I also asked them to explain what leadership has to do with teaching, and I asked what they themselves would need to take on leadership roles in their schools. If the respondents were already in leadership positions, I asked them to describe experiences that defined their roles as leaders.

Echoing a common view, many of the respondents said that leadership is influencing and inspiring others to accomplish goals by providing guidance and direction. All said that leaders need a vision of what could be accomplished. Implicit in most of the responses was the distinction between teaching and leadership. If, on the other hand, we believe that taking responsibility for what is most important to us is a precept for both teaching and leadership, then perhaps more teachers would see leadership as a natural part of their work. Saying, “I don’t want

to be a leader, I just want to be a teacher” simply wouldn’t make sense.

Through purposeful collaboration, we can develop the qualities necessary to be thoughtful leaders in our schools. We need to open our classroom doors and welcome our colleagues in with open arms, as difficult as that may be.

When teachers are afraid to share their ideas and successes for fear of being perceived as blowing their own horns; when teachers are reluctant to tell others of a new idea on the grounds that others might steal it or take credit for it (or on the assumption that others should go through the same painful discovery process that they did); when teachers, young or old, are afraid to ask for help because they might be perceived as less than competent; when a teacher uses the same approach year after year even though it is not working... it is not possible to embrace collaboration (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1996, p.39-40).

If we accepted and practiced collaboration as a natural expectation of our teaching from the very beginning of our careers, wouldn’t these obstacles diminish or disappear altogether?

How do we promote ideas that are important to us without the explicit support of the principal? Do we need that support to look more closely at our practice? Is it possible for teacher leadership to exist without permission from the administration? What does it mean to take responsibility for things that are important to us? I have been fortunate in my career to have worked with principals and superintendents who expected me to reflect more deeply and to demand more from my practice and myself, and who created opportunities for me to step up and take responsibility for things that have been important to me. But how can we encourage teachers who don’t work with such inspiring instructional leaders?

Taking responsibility for what really matters to us does not require structural changes in a school; it does not require broadening our job descriptions; it does not require contract negotiations or revisions. Leadership begins with a commitment to our craft, with or without supportive principals and superintendents.

Many teachers resist leadership roles because they worry that these roles will either interfere with their teaching or will somehow separate them from their colleagues. Do we need to leave the classroom in order to meet the demands that leadership requires? How can we nurture best practices beyond our classrooms?

We nurture our own leadership when we take responsibility for our own

professional development, and action research is one important way to own this responsibility. When we learn to gather data and look at our own practice as valid research, we make the specific work in the classroom valuable, respected, academic, and public. An important component of action research is the creation and promotion of collaborative learning communities where teachers work together, reflect on their practice, exchange ideas, and share strategies. A collaborative learning community is the most promising strategy for sustained and authentic school improvement, according to Schmoker (2004, p. 424). When we engage in action research, we're saying that our own practice is worthy of time and attention. We're telling the system that our work is of utmost importance, and that the system needs to pay attention. When we engage in action research, we grow our own content knowledge and pedagogy and promote our leadership capacity. And when we make our action research public, we are all given opportunities to contribute in meaningful ways.

Promoting action research builds leadership capacity because action research supports teachers as reflective practitioners committed to their own growth, an essential element in leadership.

Teachers learn more about changing their practice when they learn from other teachers. After her first experience with action research, one teacher wrote that having colleagues to work with provided a sounding board for her, and the questions and ideas from the group “forced [her] to think deeply about what [she] was doing.”

Another participant wrote that his action research question seemed focused on one specific idea that initially led him to think there would be a specific result or answer. However, he found that in the process he saw distinct influences on several aspects of his teaching. He wrote,

It was fascinating. The question was like a pebble dropped into a pond. Its rippling effect had a profound influence on my entire practice. This one question facilitated changes in the activities and projects I assigned, my classroom climate, and my role as a teacher of mathematics. I completely underestimated how much action research would influence my teaching and my students' perceptions of and experiences in mathematics.

This teacher continued his action research, both individually and with a group.

An integral part of action research is sharing the findings of the research, which builds a collaborative culture, diminishing or even eliminating the isolating nature of teaching. This sharing enhances our capacity for leadership because we no longer need to look only to the authorities in the hierarchy for support, direction, or vision.

When I asked colleagues, “What does leadership have to do with teaching?” the responses were fascinating. Several teachers understood that we are leaders in our classrooms. Most said that leadership has everything to do with teaching because our objectives are to support a willingness to take risks, to nurture passion for ideas, to inspire curiosity, and to foster independence so our students take charge of their own learning. Whether teachers wrote, “To teach is to lead,” or administrators wrote, “To lead is to teach,” clearly the teachers I surveyed are quite skilled in creating student-centered classrooms and the administrators are inspired teachers.

So this leads me to wonder why leadership roles and teaching are seen as mutually exclusive responsibilities. As classroom teachers, we have a clear vision of what we want for our students. What we want for them we should want for ourselves: a wide array of opportunities that engage us in experiencing, creating, and solving real problems using our own experiences and working with others in ways that contribute to the good of everyone. When we do this, we are leading our schools. Teacher-centered leadership, like student-centered classrooms, is a worthwhile goal. “To assert one’s leadership as a teacher...takes commitment to an educational ideal. It also requires the energy to combat one’s own inertia caused by habit and overwork. It requires a certain kind of courage to step outside of the small prescribed circle of traditional ‘teacher tasks,’ to declare through our actions that we care about and take responsibility for more than ... what goes on in the four walls of our classrooms” (Barth, 1988, p. 135).

I asked colleagues who were official leaders to describe one experience that reflected their role as leaders and I asked classroom teachers to explain what they would need to take on leadership roles in their schools. Again, the results were telling. All the school and district leaders spoke of experiences in which they nurtured leadership in others. They told stories of questions they asked teachers, of believing in their integrity, of engaging their intelligence and work ethic, of decisions they ultimately left up to the teachers. One colleague wrote that she considered each person’s positive contribution a form of leadership within a group.

Many teachers wrote that they would need the support and encouragement of the principal. Some wrote that they would need to be given the opportunity to

take on leadership roles; some responded with qualities that they would need to possess, such as the ability to establish trust in relationships with peers and strong communication skills. One teacher wrote, “At this time, I am not interested in taking on a leadership role in my school. I love the classroom too much!” I know that this particular teacher has taken on many leadership roles, including contributions to content knowledge through curriculum development, collaborating in professional development sessions, team-teaching, and lending an ear to frustrated colleagues. However, she clearly sees leadership as something disconnected from her teaching.

Learning to be a thoughtful leader, like learning to be a thoughtful teacher, transcends techniques and strategies to be mastered and provides us with opportunities to immerse ourselves in our own learning and leadership. When we stop seeing ourselves as technicians, when we stop allowing the hierarchy to define our craft and manage our time, and when we naturally accept our roles as researchers, we will expand our vision of who we are and what we do. We will come to view ourselves and be viewed by others as “intellectuals engaged in inquiry about teaching and learning” (Lieberman and Miller, 2004, p. 11). Inherent in this expanded vision is the idea that we are also leaders who make a difference in schools every day.

“Teaching and leadership are both about infusing life and work with passion, meaning, and purpose” (Bolman and Deal, 1993, p. 3). Leadership does not necessarily have to be about managing politics or overcoming obstacles. If we are taught from the beginning of our careers that leadership is the willingness to take responsibility for what is important to us, and we can embrace this responsibility through collaboration and action research, then we’ll begin to think differently about the nature of teaching and leadership and understand that they are not separate endeavors. In doing so, we will influence more of our colleagues to see themselves as the leaders many already are.

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