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BETLA TEACHER LEADERS: AN UNSELFISH SENSE OF PURPOSE

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Teacher leaders are those whose dreams of making a difference have either been kept alive or have been reawakened by engaging with colleagues and working within a professional culture. — Linda Lambert (2003b, p. 33)

Given an anti-bilingual, anti-immigrant national political climate, a strong case can be made that teachers who work with English language learners (ELLs) need to possess exceptional leadership skills inside and outside the classroom. Bank Street’s Bilingual/ESL [English as a Second Language] Teacher Leadership Academy (BETLA) was created to develop just such teacher leaders.

The numbers and diversity of ELLs/bilingual students help to explain the enormous instructional and institutional challenges that teachers and leaders alike need to embrace. As with any “group,” ELLs/bilingual students “vary significantly in their socioeconomic status, cultural traditions, family literacy rates, prior schooling, English proficiency and other factors” (Crawford & Krashen, 2007, p. 12). ELLs in the US speak over 460 languages, and approximately 76% of all ELLs speak Spanish at home (Kindler, 2002, as cited in García, Kleifgan, & Falchi, 2008).

The New York City Department of Education (2008) reports that ELLs constitute about 14% of the total student population—144,000 students—dispersed widely among K-12 settings. This figure does not include those students whose parents refused bilingual services or those who have placed out of ESL services but nevertheless continue to use a language other than English at home. Educators are faced with the dilemma of how to provide adequate assessments and the instructional differentiation needed to effectively serve bilingual learners.

Recognizing that much of the leadership in resolving the issues of quality and equity for this population will fall to teachers themselves, BETLA has taken on the mission of preparing teachers of ELLs for the intense and unique leadership challenges they will face. Our study of the narrative accounts of nine BETLA teacher leaders was designed to give voice to teachers who have often been silenced and to speak to the positive relevance of teacher leaders in today’s schools. The semistructured interviews took place over a two-week period and were recorded and transcribed.

Unleashing the Voice of Self-Confidence: Working from Strengths

I know that I am that much closer to being the advocate and leader I aspire to be. I aspire to make a difference in a system that fails to see (consciously and unconsciously) the needs of minorities. — BETLA teacher leader journal entry (2004)

In the above quote, the teacher leader recalls that throughout the years that he was a student in the New York City public school system, his weaknesses always seemed apparent to him. In the BETLA program, he learned to recognize his strengths as an adult and to value his possibilities within the same educational system.

I will always hold on to how I felt at the conclusion of the BETLA program as a reminder of the work I need to continue as an educator. Every attempt to share my gratitude with words was overcome with tears and silence. I am an educator, advocate, researcher, leader, and so many other roles and possibilities I have yet to discover. I now know that I must help my students feel self-confident and must work with their strengths.

All of the teacher leaders interviewed described similar experiences. They all needed to acknowledge their potential in order to feel like authentic leaders in their schools.

In collaboration with the school principal and a BETLA advisor, each teacher leader drew up a work plan that assisted them in structuring their teacher leader work. Each played an active role in identifying her/his own strengths. “It was about taking risks. The ideas could have been crazy but it was part of a vision,” recalled one teacher leader. “We realized we had a voice and had something to say.”

Many teacher leaders engaged in shared school leadership for the first time. “BETLA made me feel that someone valued what I did. It made me behave differently, made me want to share more. I started to see myself as somebody who can have a real influence on a school building.” Another teacher leader realized, “I have a lot to offer. Not only can teachers be leaders, but I can help them believe they can be leaders.” The experience of sharing their work plans and gaining the approval of school administrators empowered the teacher leaders. Moreover, their new schoolwide leadership roles provided opportunities to actually share their cultural perspective and pedagogical expertise to help change school practices.

The monthly advisement group provided support that many felt was critical

for their personal development. One teacher leader said, “I was pushed to the next level. My advisor came with an attitude of ‘You can do it!’” She remembers having felt earlier that she couldn’t or shouldn’t follow through with her ideas. “Although things haven’t changed in terms of what scares me, I have a different attitude toward that. You have to believe in yourself.” The one-to-one advisement helped provide focus for one teacher leader, who said, “It gave me a clear vision of what I wanted to do and how to do it. It brought me peace.”

The conference groups, collegial discussions, and informal support systems were highly regarded and important, as many bilingual/ESL teachers found themselves isolated in schools. One teacher stated, “Many bilingual teachers are experts in their field but they don’t have the confidence to advocate for their children because they are the minority.” Each bilingual/ESL teacher brought valuable experiences to their conversations. “You would get input from teacher leaders who were *abriendo caminos* (opening doors) in their own schools. You heard different points of view that helped you develop flexibility in understanding peoples’ needs.” One teacher recalled, “It gave me a chance to see things in a broad perspective when I really needed to.” She valued the discourse so highly, she often found herself exclaiming, “*No hablen a la misma vez* (Don’t speak at the same time) because I have to write this down!”

The cohorts themselves were critically important in clarifying and challenging stereotypes regarding gender, class, and identity. “I think the fact that it was predominantly women really encouraged those voices that are often shut down. The advisors, the professors, the directors, all of these women were professional role models for the rest of us...” One teacher leader explained, “My parents have always cleaned offices and houses...the exposure and opportunity to identify with exceptional Latino educational leaders and role models opened up new possibilities for who I can become.”

While all the Latino teacher leaders felt proud of their ethnicity, some admitted to also holding on to self-deprecating ideas. Many teacher leaders grew up feeling that being bilingual was a disadvantage. Some felt discriminated against for speaking with an accent and using a Spanish-language variation not valued by other Spanish speakers. Two teacher leaders admitted that, until they met their BETLA cohort, they believed that bilingual teachers were not very well-educated and did not speak English very well. Through ongoing conversation and participation, BETLA teacher leaders seem to have developed a critical awareness of what it means to be bilingual and/or Latino in the field of education. They challenged

old stereotypes, personal ideologies, and their history. They defined and redefined their identities as people and as leaders. The experience empowered them and amplified their voice.

Identification with ELLs and Their Communities

These are the kids I see myself in, and I can't let them not get to college because they don't have the background...It's a very political thing. If we leave [the profession], who's left for our kids?...If I worked in a completely monolingual environment, I would lose a part of myself. —BETLA teacher leader

A close identification with ELLs and their communities was the basis of teacher leader advocacy. It fueled the type of leadership needed to support the needs of bilingual students. As teacher leaders, the BETLA participants developed and defended practices that support the social, emotional, academic, and linguistic development of their students. Throughout the interviews, we heard BETLA teacher leaders connect quite emotionally to their students' lives and educational experiences.

One teacher, whose father is Italian-American and whose mother is originally from Colombia, stated:

Although I was born in the US, I thought of myself as an immigrant. My education stemmed from my family... making my parents proud, being polite, being proud of your heritage, economical, not wasting things...all of those things were part of my upbringing.

She explained that she relied on an “American” high school friend, who lived in Greenwich Village and whose father was a political science teacher, to introduce her to a “world beyond my little world” and “to gain entry into academics and to their cultural things like camp, summer programs...the best colleges.” Her friend provided access to the types of cultural capital she felt she needed to succeed in the academic world.

Later, in explaining her reasons for becoming a teacher, she said:

I realized that when they [teachers] said we were smart, it was because we were doing things that they wanted us to do. It wasn't through our own creativity. I realized that I didn't understand what intelligence was, that I didn't

understand what education was. For a long time I thought education was following the rules... If we are going to help kids from Queens like me get to places like Swarthmore, we have to use their real potential, not have them jump through hoops. That's when I realized that teaching small children is really powerful.

She attempts to redefine the term intelligence and questions the instructional practices she encountered in her New York City public school experience. In her interview, she speaks of the importance of creating “bridges” between home and school, and trying to understand the practices that families have in common.

Similarly, one teacher leader revealed that he had considered himself “lazy” much of his life because of an education that did not value his culture. He realizes now that “I was just *curious* that entire time and perhaps didn't fit the mold of what I was expected to do in school.”

One teacher leader tells of making a conscious decision to return to the South Bronx to work in public schools, even though he received offers to work in the private sector. He too makes reference to school practices.

I realized that when I went to prep school and college [Ivy League], I was learning how to think. I was learning how to write. I was learning how to speak. But when I was going to public schools, it was more about drilling, not really helping you become that intellectual. When I realized that there was that big gap, I wanted to make a difference. I wanted to give people from my community the opportunity to get a good education and to ensure that everyone gets an equitable education. I wanted to be at the forefront of all that.

These teacher leaders all considered their cultural and educational experiences to be the reasons that they became educators. They all expressed the need to play an active role in shaping the school curriculum. They hope to empower their students to be able to enter unfamiliar worlds and to feel entitled to articulate their beliefs, while still maintaining their strong family connections.

Nieto (1999) describes the importance of a teacher's identification with students and its relationship to pedagogy:

The purpose of identifying with one's students is not to dabble in other people's cultures, but to use the relationships that ensue to change classroom practices to be more effective with a wider range of students. It is a process that is as empowering and enriching for teachers as it is for the students with whom they work (p. 153).

These teachers see their relationships with parents and communities as opportunities for developing practice that is both responsive and respectful of their students' needs.

Another teacher leader admits that it took time for her to learn to respect and appreciate the reality of student and family life outside the classroom. In her early years as an educator, she did not consider the needs and interests of parents, and characterized her attitude toward them as "pretentious and self-centered." Being responsive to families within current public schools demands sacrifice, perseverance, and a strong sense of self. Valuing and incorporating family culture in an already highly standardized one-size-fits-all curriculum is difficult work.

A Call for Action: Redefining Teacher Leadership

For BETLA students, the term "teacher leadership" encompassed a broad definition that included self-development, instructional leadership, and a shared responsibility to students and their community. The commitment to meeting the needs of the complex diversity of bilingual students required the participants to expand their roles as teachers and leaders in public schools.

Self-development

Leadership was recognized as a deep, evolving, and reflective process. An understanding of their strengths and identity, as well as feeling empowered in schools, served as catalysts for the development of leadership abilities. One teacher leader stated, "I am going to be a leader as long as I perceive myself as one and do what I have to do."

Courage and strong communication skills are needed to fulfill the role of the teacher leader. One stated, "It takes a lot of confidence to get up in front of adults and embody knowledge and behavior people can respect." Regardless of race, language differences, perceptions of self, doubt, and stress, the teacher leaders identified the absolute need to feel comfortable in their own skin. One believes, "You need to own who you are, so you can allow yourself to sincerely share aspects

of yourself. It allows me to feel calm in stressful situations. I now trust myself.” This is an essential quality if the teacher leader is to support family practices that do not seem to belong in the public school.

These teacher leaders worked hard to develop cultures of trust and respectful, collaborative learning in their schools. They found the need to invest in genuine conversation. “My goal was to make a connection with each person and I knew the connection was going to be different [with each].” Teacher leaders are facilitators, coaches, and critical friends. One explains, “It is not ‘I want to see what you’re doing in your room because I don’t know if you are doing that right’—but more like, ‘Let me see what you are doing so I can better my practice.’”

Learning to listen and collaborate with others proved challenging for the teacher leaders. One said, “I’ve worked on becoming more socially-emotionally intelligent and learning how to communicate nonviolently and just become more well-balanced as a person.” Interactions with colleagues entail patience, deep reflection, and awareness of one’s needs and those of others. Teacher leaders are liaisons between teachers and curriculum, and teachers and administrators. “Learning how to become more diplomatic and more emotionally intelligent is *very* important. Learning how to listen, and learning how to get two different factions within the school to learn and collaborate in order to resolve school issues is extremely challenging.”

Instructional Leadership

Differentiating instruction and educating bilingual students present many challenges. As one teacher leader put it, “I didn’t realize how much work [it was] and how hard it was to be able to meet the needs of every student.” Another teacher leader shared her concerns, “Many times our ELLs come off as incompetent due to language barriers. People judge them as low-performing children.” A third believes teachers need help with accurately measuring a student’s language growth. She worries teachers are “lumping ELLs together.”

Understanding bilingualism and learning to support the spectrum of language learners require careful analysis of student work, curriculum, content, language, and social goals. Students who are labeled as SIFE (students with interrupted formal education) or long-term ELLs present other challenges that require a deep understanding of their needs and innovative ideas. One high school teacher leader calls for a serious commitment if “they [ELLs] are going to graduate, no matter when they come to the country.” BETLA teacher leaders have helped cre-

ate newcomer classes and collaborative relationships with social workers to foster their students' social and emotional growth.

Teacher leaders understand that “you are more than yourself when you collaborate.” It was important for them to rely on their BETLA network and also to find people in their school to form groups they could depend upon. “Working in a team, you can come up with an idea/approach toward very complex problems. These are not decisions one person can make.”

These teacher leaders are continually refining their practice as educators of bilingual learners and are committed to “learning how to teach even better than yesterday.” Their teacher leadership requires them to step outside their classrooms to work with a network of educators to promote what is best for ELLs.

Shared Responsibility to Students and Their Community

These teacher leaders take risks, embrace a sense of duty, and engage proactively with others to generate change in schools. When asked to give advice to teachers, one said, “You need to take chances.” She continued, “If you explain your philosophy, your mission, your vision...if you articulate that to the principal and you say, ‘I am suggesting an alternative because I think it’s best for the kids’...you could probably get your administrator on board.” Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) emphasize, “teacher leadership represents a major shift from old norms of teaching in isolation and focusing on just ‘my students.’ Many teachers have rethought their roles and now engage in collaborative work on a shared school vision, and many practice shared decision making with colleagues, parents, and administrators” (pp. 3-4).

Many principals recognize “a myriad of opportunities in teachers” and foster shared leadership in their buildings. However, in a time of NCLB [No Child Left Behind] and an increasing emphasis on testing, one teacher leader believes her administration is too focused “on data and assessment.” She continues, “Teacher leaders need to fill that gap in order to improve the teaching quality of the entire staff.” Another understands “that their primary role is to make sure [that] what they do works [for] the students. You have to have courage to advocate for your students...to help them grow.”

As bilingual educators working in a highly political field, teacher leaders find their leadership extending beyond their schools. Taking on this role can be challenging. As one teacher leader put it,

I'm not a political person, but it's a pill I have to swallow. You have to be political! You have to seek out other people in the know who are popular and in the media. You have to put yourself out there to get what you need for your students.

Another said teacher leadership is “acting on beliefs, on what you think is the right thing to do.” She explained that the United States has a “history of racism, discrimination, class divisions, and other factors. Equity and principles of equal treatment are very strong with me.” She shared her experience of being politically active by writing letters to various newspapers nationwide. She believes that many people do not understand the bilingual/ESL field and that it is important to share “our truths.” She also stresses that teachers need to be a part of organizations that support the educational excellence of ELLs.

The BETLA teacher leaders have been involved in writing grants for parents and students, providing resources, facilitating study groups, providing staff development, and coaching teachers. They have addressed policy issues at the local, state, and national levels. Several have made presentations at conferences, provided professional development to local and state audiences, responded to anti-bilingual and anti-immigrant editorials in national and local newspapers, and lobbied state and national policymakers. All have taken on advocacy roles on behalf of bilingual learners.

Fulfilling an Unselfish Sense of Purpose

I have been entrusted with a legacy. I have a serious responsibility to keep up with the literature, develop a set of competencies, finding that relationship, and develop that trust to share what you know. —BETLA teacher leader

All the BETLA teacher leaders know that their ability to improve instruction for bilingual learners is contingent upon a supportive environment. All of those interviewed acknowledged that they work in school cultures that promote their role as teacher leaders. Research literature corroborates the significance of a supportive environment in encouraging successful teacher leader roles (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson & Hann, 2002; Danielson, 2006; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001). For successful teacher leadership to occur, school leaders need to value teacher input, support risk taking, commit to shared leadership roles, provide opportunities for teacher discourse and inquiry, and allow for a sincere and sus-

tained exchange with students and their communities.

Several teacher leaders felt disillusionment at having been in settings where administrators did not support a vision of shared leadership and had little knowledge of their students' cultures and language needs. They expressed concern for schools that have little contact with the community and where the pedagogy was not reflective of their students' needs. Two teacher leaders, now assistant principals, understand the importance of these issues and acknowledge the control school leaders have over their budgets and school curriculum.

The BETLA teacher leaders interviewed represent a group of people as diverse as their ELL/bilingual students. They hold tremendous cultural capital that is often overlooked by society. The range of socioeconomic classes, educational experiences, cultural practices, languages, and transnational experiences position them uniquely to help schools meet the challenges of the contemporary world. Complex solutions and strong teacher leadership are needed if we are to truly build on the strengths of our bilingual learners. Often viewed as outsiders in the highly standardized, mostly English-speaking institution of the public school, these leaders cannot wait until they are invited in before accepting that they have a critical role to play in fashioning a new public culture containing many new and previously silenced voices.