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LITERACY LEADERSHIP FROM THE CLASSROOM:

Learning from Teacher Leaders

The beginning of this school year is like no other. It brings unprecedented and unwelcome challenges, but it also offers important opportunities—for meaningful professional learning, for authentic improvement within our schools, and for real progress toward creating systems that ensure equitable outcomes for all students. The challenges remind our society of the vital importance of educators and schools. The opportunities remind our profession that leadership at every level—district, school, and classroom—is essential as we rise to this moment. As you adjust to the new, lean into the practices that you have learned make a positive impact on the emotional, social, and literacy outcomes of students. Those practices, with a tweak here and there, stand up in any learning environment. Also, continue to build and nurture a collaborative, supportive culture that rests on the shared values of your learning community. Students and families will be best served when we, as professional educators, meet the challenges and embrace the opportunities together.

The effectiveness of literacy education within the classroom is dependent on the expertise of the teacher. The effectiveness of literacy education throughout the school is increased when a teacher becomes a leader, sharing her expertise with colleagues to strengthen the entire literacy system. In this column, we address the roles of three audiences in supporting the growth of teacher leaders: (a) principals or other leaders who want to build the capacity for shared leadership in their schools, (b) literacy coaches who value the expertise of teachers and want to develop them as leaders, and (c) teachers who want to grow professionally and contribute to their team by engaging in acts of leadership. If you are a principal or other school leader, think about the particular expertise of the teachers in your building and the potential for growing their leadership. If you are a coach, think about teachers who show interest and the ability to actively support the professional learning of their colleagues. If you are a teacher who is

energized by your work, consider ways to expand your leadership skills and influence students' literacy outcomes by contributing to the success of your team.

The New Frontier in School Improvement

The frontier in school improvement has shifted dramatically. With good reason, most educators have abandoned the notion of quick fixes, even if they sound good (e.g., new standards, a new curriculum, a new teacher evaluation system). Also, researchers have moved away from large-scale reform efforts toward a model of continuous improvement that takes place within individual schools or a small network of schools. Educators at the building level are in the best position to understand the causes and complexities of problems to be solved, and to test and refine solutions based on evidence (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015). Improvements that produce positive outcomes can then be scaled up for wider implementation. We think this is a strong model that can empower teachers and school leaders to create lasting and sustainable improvements. Many educators are using this model to examine the complex constellation of issues that contribute to the current

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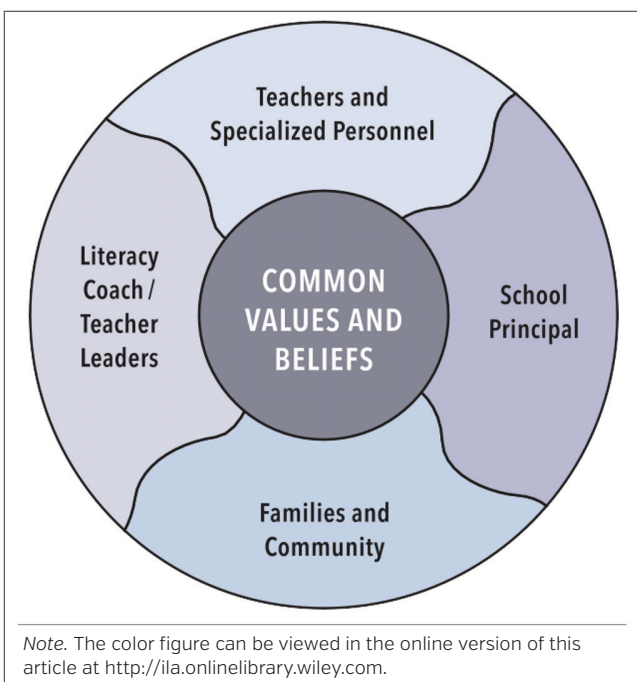
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reality; that is, too many students do not have access to academic opportunity. The designation “not proficient at grade level” is assigned to a disproportionate number of students of color, students living in poverty and/ or with trauma, students whose first language is not English, students with limited language skills, and students with a variety of special needs. The educational system as it presently functions places limits on many students’ future health, experiences, career opportunities, and life enjoyment.

Forward-thinking administrators understand that access and equity in literacy are the responsibility of all stakeholders in the system. They understand that they cannot be the lone instructional leader in the system and that all stakeholders are assets to students’ literacy learning. Redesigning the system calls for collective responsibility and collaborative professionalism at all levels and among all groups. It requires a culture of shared leadership that engages teachers, specialized personnel, coaches, principals and administrators, families, and the community as partners around a set of common, aspirational values and beliefs (see Figure 1).

Educators’ shared commitment and understandings break down the silos that often exist in schools and fuel the inquiry, communication, and teamwork that solve problems of practice. The team of educators assumes collective responsibility and accountability for the success of their students and their colleagues. Within a culture of shared leadership, expertise can be identified and built across the entire team.

Figure 1
A Culture of Shared Leadership



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

In our work with schools, our primary goal has been to support the system’s internal capacity for expanding the professional expertise of administrators, coaches, teacher leaders, and teachers. Investment in the capacity of the professionals to develop deep expertise will have the best payoff for student outcomes (Darling-Hammond, Hylar, & Gardner, 2017). There are a variety of opportunities to build the school’s professional capacity. The principal and coach play important roles.

Investing in a Literacy Coach

Many schools have realized the importance of investing in a literacy coach whose primary role is to support teacher development alongside the principal, who has a much broader role in leading the school. Unfortunately, not all schools have the resources to support a coach position. Many are working toward having the reading specialist or literacy specialist take on more leadership roles in the building with the hope that the specialist will eventually become a coach.

A good literacy coach needs to be an effective literacy teacher, although that qualification is not sufficient. Just because a person is a good teacher of young students does not mean she is a good teacher of adults. With such a large investment—one with a longterm impact—the coach must be selected carefully, and high-quality, ongoing training is essential for the coach’s success. The coach also needs the time, structures, and resources to make an impact in the school. In many schools, the time that coaches actually spend with individual teachers and teams of teachers is minimal and can have little effect.

The coach works to create a community within which teachers develop their ability to reflect on and analyze teaching and learning. In addition to the multiple roles most literacy coaches take on in a school, the highly effective coach fosters a culture of teamwork and inquiry and values the expertise of teachers. The coach also understands that teachers can influence each other’s learning through their strengths and intentionally creates opportunities for some to expand their expertise in leadership.

We have worked with schools to expand the principal and coach leadership team to include a variety of teacher leaders who take on, formally or informally, a variety of important leadership roles. The concept of a teacher leader is not new, and yet teachers who have the ability and interest in assuming active leadership roles are an often-neglected resource in a school. When the person is provided with time, structures, and resources as well as mentoring and high-quality, ongoing leadership training, the impact on the culture of the school is dramatic and the

improvement in student outcomes is promising (Fountas & Pinnell, in press).

What Is a Teacher Leader?

A teacher leader and a coach share many of the same skills and dispositions, but the teacher has the primary role of teaching students, and the coach has the primary role of supporting the development of teachers. Teacher leaders are classroom teachers or specialists who demonstrate the potential and interest in taking on tasks or roles that leverage their expertise and influence to strengthen the expertise of their colleagues. Like coaches, they believe in the commitment and capabilities of their colleagues to refine their craft and demonstrate a genuine dedication to building a collaborative, reflective community. They honor various perspectives and are guided by the evidence that prompts a team to take actions toward their mutual goals. With the goal of coherence, teacher leaders are always moving in a direction that is consistent with the common values and beliefs of the school.

Like literacy coaches, effective teacher leaders exemplify qualities and dispositions that enable them to have a significant impact on the school and the system (see Figure 2). In contrast to a full-time coach, the role of teacher leader can be informal and voluntary as classroom or specialist teachers unofficially take on short or long-term leadership roles on behalf of the literacy program. Even if the role is unofficial, teacher leaders receive the backing and support of the principal and coach. In some schools, the role is formalized by providing occasional time away from daily teaching and additional compensation for the increased responsibilities. These policies are well established in the policies and procedures of the school. Whether informal or formalized, unofficial or established, voluntary or compensated, all teacher leaders need mentoring and special ongoing professional training for leading and teaching adult learners. If we expect teacher leaders to be successful school wide leaders, they deserve such support (see Figure 3).

Figure 2
Qualities and Dispositions of Teacher Leaders

- The stance of a reflective, continuous learner
- Evidence of intellectual curiosity
- Openness to new perspectives
- A humble and tentative stance
- Evidence of effective language and literacy teaching
- Strong content knowledge, particularly in language, reading, and writing development
- A strong understanding of culturally relevant teaching
- Belief in the competencies of each team member
- Strong interpersonal and communication skills
- An ability to help others build self-efficacy
- The capacity of building trust, shared ownership, and teamwork in the school community
- Strong observational skills to examine teaching interactions
- A deep understanding of the role data-informed teaching in assuring equitable student outcomes
- A commitment to evidence-based decision making
- A thorough understanding of the structures of school organization

Acts of Teacher Leadership

You can probably think of dozens of leadership actions that can be initiated by teachers and supported by principals or coaches. We have listed just a few examples in Figure 4.

Figure 3
Supporting Teacher Leaders



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

Figure 4
Acts of Teaching Leadership

Researcher

- Lead grade-level or vertical teams in the analysis of assessment data and its implications for teaching.
- Convene the staff to work for reliability in administering a benchmark assessment or in assessing comprehension or fluency in reading.
- Organize and lead an analysis of data at grade level or across grade levels to identify problem areas and goals.
- Convene a data group to examine student work in reading, writing, or writing about reading at selected intervals and note patterns of growth.
- Work with a group of colleagues to reach agreement on the characteristics of effective instruction in a particular instructional context, develop a rubric that reflects them, and try it out in peer observation.
- Lead a group to examine student outcomes with the goal of identifying problems related to equity and set goals to solve them.

Inquiry Team Leader

- Invite colleagues to observe videos of classroom instruction and engage in the analysis of teaching interactions.
- Work with a study group to plan common lessons and come back together to reflect on what was powerful and what could be adjusted.
- Facilitate a discussion of a professional article at grade-level meetings.
- Join a colleague to observe classes in the previous or next grade in your school and later compare notes.
- Make a video of a lesson or part of several lessons and convene colleagues to discuss it.

Lead Learner

- Attend a conference or other learning experience and make a plan to share the content and new learning with colleagues.
- Create a collaborative group online to engage in dialogue about a topic or post brief clips of teaching and learning for comments.
- Invite teachers to share recorded lessons or parts of lessons and make comparisons across the group.
- Offer a workshop on a topic of interest to colleagues, such as analyzing running records or other topics related to the school's improvement goals.
- Convene a few colleagues to apply for a grant to purchase professional materials to share.

Mentor

- Assist new teachers in classroom organization and management.
- Offer help as a mentor in implementing instructional contexts for literacy learning.
- Offer help as a mentor in using tools such as *The Fountas & Pinnell Literacy Continuum* or district/state standards in planning for instruction.

Improvement Science Leader

- Lead an inquiry group to understand and identify a problem of practice, make a plan to study it, and take action (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015).
- Lead an inquiry group to examine organizational issues that affect the whole school, and propose changes to improve instruction time.
- Lead an inquiry group to identify sources of inequity in the policies or practices in the school.
- Lead an inquiry group to study policies and practices that can help save time for dedicated, uninterrupted time for instruction.

How Principals and Literacy Coaches Can Work Together to Develop Teacher Leaders

One of the principal's most important challenges is to develop capacity in others for shared leadership and increasing collective expertise. The principal has primary responsibility for the success of every student in the school and cannot abandon that authority. However, the principal's success requires harnessing and developing the leadership of teachers. This challenge requires letting go of a strict top-down hierarchy and nurturing and amplifying teachers' voices in educating students. A trusting relationship between principal and teachers goes a long way toward the development of an aligned educator team.

Positive actions that principals can take to develop teacher leaders include the following:

- Identifying teachers with particular talents or interests who can contribute to the faculty as a whole and integrating some leadership goals into their performance evaluation discussions
- Speaking personally with teachers to nudge them into short or longterm leadership roles instead of asking for "volunteers" in a faculty meeting
- Sitting in and supporting teacher meetings by deferring to the teachers in charge rather than taking a leadership position
- Rotating the leader of various meetings so different teachers have the opportunity to lead
- Encouraging the staff to diagnose and analyze problems of practice that can be addressed by teams of teachers

Principals and literacy coaches can work together to suggest or guide the staff to identify tasks and projects that require leadership. Individual teachers or grade-level teams may come up with ideas, and they will need support. Teacher leadership can be built by creating the vision, the space, and the organizational structures that enable teachers to try new roles such as those described in Figure 4. These new opportunities not only show value for the primary role of classroom instruction but also build potential leaders for the system over time. An intentional investment in the leadership capacity of teachers accomplishes many important goals (see Figure 5).

The growth of teacher leadership is essential for school improvement and creating collective efficacy, which was identified by Hattie (2012) as the single most important predictor of high student outcomes. It will also increase teacher agency. Teachers who enjoy teamwork and believe they have important

Figure 5
Results of Investing in the Leadership Capacity of Teachers

- **Show value for maintaining an important role in the classroom while taking leadership roles.**
- **Attract, retain, and grow effective teachers.**
- **Develop teacher agency.**
- **Maximize the power of collective efficacy.**
- **Create meaningful opportunities for collaboration with colleagues.**
- **Emphasize the professionalization of the teaching role.**
- **Prepare future leaders for the system.**

contributions that will make a difference in student outcomes can come together as a positive force for change. Teachers who see themselves as leaders who are making a difference develop confidence in their own decisions. They find more engagement, commitment, and joy in the work. At the same time, they create a dynamic learning environment for themselves and their colleagues (Fountas & Pinnell, in press).

The Melda Story: A Visionary Plan for Investing in the Professional Capacity of the System

To demonstrate many of the ideas put forth in this column, we share a recent firsthand experience with a school district–university partnership that focused on expanding professional capacity and improving student outcomes. The following actions were orchestrated by a visionary central office team and school-level leaders from each of over 30 elementary schools across one school year. We will call the district Melda for the purpose of anonymity.

Melda is an urban school system with high levels of poverty and rich linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity. There are no literacy specialist positions in the buildings to provide small-group supplementary services to students, though there are other valuable specialists, such as special education and English learner specialists, who provide supplementary services. The district is fortunate to have an instructional coach in each building who works closely with the principal, but the coach is spread very thin across pre-K–6 grade levels and the disciplines of literacy, social studies, science, mathematics, and technology. The system is challenged by unsatisfactory levels of student outcomes, with disproportionate

numbers of students from the subgroups in the lowest achieving categories. The teachers demonstrate a strong commitment to the students but have had limited opportunity for professional learning in recent years. What follows is a description of the actions Melda took over the course of a school year to create improvement in students' literacy outcomes.

Getting on the Same Page

The school year began with every elementary school principal and the team of central office leaders, including special education and English learner specialists, coming together for monthly professional learning opportunities to examine their core values and beliefs about literacy teaching and learning. They created a common vision and goals for improving access and equity in literacy for all students, delved into the theoretical foundations of language and literacy learning, and built their knowledge of essential elements of high-quality assessment and literacy instruction as they examined evidence-based instructional practices. With an eye toward supporting coherence in teacher understanding and practice, they used *The Fountas & Pinnell Literacy Continuum* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017) to develop a common set of goals and understandings about literacy proficiency and a variety of observational tools to scaffold their support for effective literacy teaching. With an emphasis on responsive teaching, they built common, foundational knowledge to support the development of teacher expertise. They prioritized actions they might take to foster a culture of teamwork and collaborative professionalism in their buildings and shared lessons learned with each other.

Expanding the Impact Through Coaches and Teacher Leaders

Following the series of training sessions for principals, the central administration invited the instructional coach from each school to join them in continued professional learning. In addition, the principals were asked to bring a teacher leader from a primary-grade team who showed interest and potential for supporting their colleagues' learning. Before the coaches and teacher leaders joined the principals, they received the same professional learning that the principals received. Equity in professional development laid the foundation for common understandings and provided the impetus for a team that brought a variety of expertise to the leadership role. The next series of sessions were marked by a new level of energy. The conversation changed as the principal heard and acknowledged the information and insights contributed by the coaches and teacher leaders. The teachers knew the students as

individuals, and they had insider advice on how various approaches worked on the ground, how adjustments needed to be made, and the demands of diverse populations. They had daily interactions with colleagues and could bring realistic perspectives to the conversation. They offered their classrooms as places where the principal or coach could observe or engage in trying out the assessments or instructional practices. They talked about making their classrooms observational learning labs for their primary-grade colleagues. The teacher leaders noted the collaborative efforts of principals and coaches (e.g., supervision versus coaching). The principal, coach, and teacher leader from each school engaged in energetic discussions as they applied their learning, set priorities, and developed actions to bring back to their school team. Many planned to work together as a leadership team to provide professional learning sessions for colleagues.

Next Steps: Sustaining the Growth

Fast forward: The visionary central office team realized that the investment in professional capacity should be continued so that the teachers could dig deeper and so that they could prevent backward drift. They contemplated how to scale up excellence with the input of the leadership team. They extended their plan for continued professional learning into the future and made a commitment to add an intermediate teacher leader and several specific content teacher leaders (lead learners) to engage their expertise and expand the professional capacity of each of the schools.

In addition to the leadership team of principal, coach, and two teacher leaders, along with special education and English learner specialists, they planned to train lead learners in specific content areas to support needs in assessment, phonics, and literacy intervention. These interested teacher leaders would engage in intensive professional learning across the year in their specific areas so they could apply their learning to their own classrooms and share their learning with their colleagues.

Lessons Learned

So, what can we learn from the Melda story? Think about the elements of the process that helped these teams succeed and have positive impacts on the literacy outcomes of the students in their schools:

- A set of common values and beliefs created coherence and served as the foundation for decision making.
- The central office and building leadership envisioned themselves as one team with common goals.
- Specialist personnel were highly valued members of the team.

- Trust among team members grew because they had time to collaborate and talk together about what they were learning and thinking.
- Leaders valued and welcomed the expertise of instructional coaches and teachers. There was an understanding that a top-down initiative tends not to take root unless classroom teachers take it on, share as they learn, and help the initiative grow within the school.
- Educators invested in leadership capacity, despite not having the resources to add new employee positions.
- Educators placed students at the center of their decisions, with responsive teaching as a goal that would address diversity in strengths and needs.
- Through their collaboration, members of the leadership team built trust and ownership of the work on behalf of the school.
- Small steps and initiatives were at the root of shifting the learning cultures in the schools from a siloed group of individual teachers to a collaborative team of educators.
- The system leadership prioritized communication, shared ownership, and shared leadership as they created thoughtful plans for bringing their actions to scale across the system. The leaders' approach took into account that greater variation often exists *within* schools than *among* schools when implementing a coherent initiative.

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Looking Forward

As you reflect on this column, we hope you agree that teacher leadership holds exciting potential for building the capacity of schools to improve teacher expertise and student outcomes. If you are a principal or other school leader, we hope you will take every opportunity to nurture the leadership of teachers in your school by thinking in new ways about how to engage a variety of teachers, clearly defining roles, and providing sufficient time, ongoing training, and adequate resources for them to support effective instruction and student learning. If you are a coach, we hope you partner with and mentor teacher leaders with fresh energy to expand the expertise of educators across grade levels. If you are a teacher, we encourage you to step out and embrace acts of leadership. You will grow as a professional and enjoy the feeling of accomplishment as you make a difference in the professional lives of your colleagues and in the literate lives of the students in your school community.