

Explore how teacher-leaders can help change the focus from an accounting of learning to an accountability for learning.

Can Teachers Really Be Leaders?

by Ann Lieberman



This is a wonderfully provocative question that might be answered simply: Yes, teachers can be leaders! Much more complicated and interesting, though, are the specifics of how teachers become leaders and the different ways teachers lead.

Before considering how teachers become leaders, we need to understand the context within which teachers are being called upon to lead. First, we must examine the major challenge for schools today, and then contemplate the policies that constrain or enable good teaching. In this context, we can reflect on how teacher-leaders make a difference. And lastly, we can take a close look at some examples of the different kinds of teacher-leaders we now have and the important leadership roles they play.

The Challenge for Schools Today

The major challenge for schools is to ensure that *all* students are prepared with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for the 21st century. Our new economy demands that all students be prepared for work and citizenry, and that they attain high standards of achievement traditionally available to only a select few. This generation of students needs to graduate from high school with the ability to think and reason, and to be comfortable with complex cognitive demands. Students also must have a readiness to be flexible and adaptive, and enjoy a command of print as well as both visual and digital literacies.

This is a heavy load for schools and teachers! It is made all the more difficult by the shifting demographics of the student population, the projected shortage of qualified teachers, and the reduced role of government in supporting and solving local problems (Lieberman and Miller 2004).

Policies that Constrain or Enable Good Teaching

The most common policy stance we have today is to hold schools accountable for meeting externally mandated standards

of student achievement. The purpose is to establish a set of guaranteed outcomes for all students and to measure them objectively and efficiently by testing all students. Unfortunately, the original intention has had serious negative consequences—on teachers, students, schools, and districts. Standards have become synonymous with standardized testing. And standardized testing has narrowed the curriculum so that teachers must teach to the test rather than to their students. In many instances, this undermining of the original purpose is having negative effects on the ability of teachers to provide a rich and varied educational program for their students (Hargreaves 2003).

An alternative policy stance taken by Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1999) is that we set forth a coherent vision of teaching and learning across the school system and recognize the diverse contexts within which teachers and students learn best. Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin have suggested policies that enable and build the capacity of teachers to respond to student needs using a variety of approaches to teaching that are differentially effective in different circumstances.

Both of these policy stances are being played out in our country, and teachers often must find ways to negotiate between them. It is within this policy context that we can illustrate how and why teacher-leaders can make a difference.

How Teacher-Leaders Can Make a Difference

Teachers who become leaders are in a unique position to make change happen. They have learned a great deal about how to teach well and know how to build the kind of school and classroom conditions that can help transform schools. They have not only “been there,” but they also have successfully worked with all kinds of students and have learned how to facilitate adult learning as well. They have learned to teach well in the context of a classroom and have developed the kind of knowledge that teachers trust and believe.



In today's context, teacher-leaders can influence decision-making in a number of ways—all critical in transforming schools.

Leaders of New Forms of Accountability and Assessment

Teacher-leaders can challenge the dominance of standardized tests as the sole criterion for success in school. They are in a unique position to draw on their expertise and enter the national conversation; they can help change the focus from an accounting of learning to an accountability for learning. They can insist that teachers be involved in the planning of any accountability schemes so that teachers can commit to taking responsibility for their own as well as their students' learning. They can help shape the performance assessments that show what students are learning from their teaching, rather than relying on standardized test scores that are often unrelated to their classroom work.

Innovators in Rethinking the Norms and Expectations for Students

Teachers in leadership positions can become change agents and help in reshaping the school day; changing grouping and organizational practices; ensuring more equitable distribution of resources; actively engaging in implementing curricula that is sensitive to diverse populations; finding time for their fellow teachers to learn together; supporting the kind of talk that leads to openness about problems; and holding high expectations for *all* students (Lieberman and Miller 2004). Teachers who take on this kind of leadership are those that are most trusted by their colleagues.

Change Agents for an Invigorated Profession

Teacher-leaders can help define the teaching profession as an intellectual and collaborative enterprise. By expanding their repertoire of strategies, teachers can provide examples of alternatives to restrictive mandates. They can nuance mandates, provide alternative ways of thinking about them, and formulate (with teachers) how to embellish the restrictions. They can lobby for professional development that draws on veteran teachers to support novice teachers. And they can help facilitate professional learning communities where people can engage in honest talk and get honest help. In these ways, they can sustain teacher commitment, passion, and persistence.

We now know that teachers who work together in their schools can become a powerful influence on the culture and can serve as an example to their district.

Teacher-Leaders of All Kinds

We are fortunate that we have a number of examples of teachers who are assuming leadership in both formal and informal ways. Though the examples that follow are formal, teachers in many schools help their colleagues informally as well. Some are change

agents, others outstanding teachers, while some learn to facilitate particular teaching strategies and are informally called upon to help.

Teachers as Professional Developers

For years, teachers have been told that they need to use “this” curriculum or “these” teaching strategies. The assumption has been that knowledge from the outside will improve teaching. Outside “developers” have been hired to provide this help, and a generic form of “professional development” has been the accepted form. However, several organizations have grown up with a different approach to learning, which includes teachers themselves as the “developers” and “leaders.”

Perhaps the single largest, most effective opportunity for teachers to learn to be professional developers lies in their membership in the National Writing Project (NWP). Diane Wood and I studied two university-based sites of the NWP and documented why the NWP is so successful as well as how teachers learn to become professional developers (Lieberman and Wood 2003). We found that the Summer Institute, which teachers attend in universities all over the United States, develops a set of *social practices* that provide teachers with an approach to leadership as they engage with others in learning to write, being part of a community, sharing their teaching strategies, and reading and critiquing both research and literature together. The social practices (Lieberman and Friedrich 2010, 5) include:

- approaching each colleague as a valuable contributor;
- honoring teacher knowledge;
- creating public forums for sharing;
- turning ownership of learning over to the learners;
- situating human learning in practice and relationships;
- providing multiple entry points into the community;
- guiding reflection on teaching through reflection on learning;
- sharing leadership;
- promoting an inquiry stance; and
- encouraging a reconceptualization of professional identity and linking it to community.

Writing Project teachers learn to go public with their work by teaching their favorite lesson or strategy to the other participants. They come to understand that learning in a community helps them frame problems and figure out together how to solve them. In the process of engaging in the social practices that are integrated in the Summer Institute, many teachers learn strategies they can use for their students as well as how to work with adults in improving their practice. For example, teachers soon find themselves in a professional community, sharing and shaping their writing with feedback from their peers. Though they are the subjects in the summer institute, teachers realize that they can do the very same thing in their classrooms with their students.

Laureates Speak

Teacher-Leaders as Mentors

The New Teacher Center (NTC) in Santa Cruz, California, focuses on preparing mentors to work effectively with teachers during their first two years of teaching, now called the “induction years.” Like the NWP, the NTC selects excellent teachers and instills in them the knowledge and skills for mentoring new teachers by supporting them and providing them with continuous professional development as they learn to mentor teachers in a variety of contexts.

Mentors learn to lead by navigating a variety of tensions that inevitably occur when they enter schools to support teachers who are novices (Lieberman et al., in press). Mentors must learn to understand and work with the whole adult culture, not just teachers and their classrooms. They need to learn to work with administrators as well as veteran teachers. As mentors gain experience in their roles, they learn that some contexts can be very challenging for the new teacher as well as the mentor. Navigating these tensions as they arise is part of what teaches mentors to lead and provides them with the kind of experiences that both broaden and deepen their work.

Many have asked why the NWP and the NTC are so successful. One easy and important answer is that each of these long-term projects was initiated by a teacher. The NWP was the brainchild of Jim Gray, a secondary teacher; and the NTC was launched by Ellen Moir, initially a bilingual teacher in Santa Cruz.

Each of these initiatives starts with what teachers know and builds its program around teacher learning.

Teachers as Scholars

For ten years, from 1998–2008, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching pursued the idea that teachers could be scholars (Hatch et al. 2005). As our work progressed, we realized that using multimedia, teachers could capture and share a piece of their teaching on the Internet so that others could learn from it. We encouraged teachers to create multimedia Web sites, and we formed a clearinghouse for collections of teaching practice (see *insideteaching.org*).

Teachers could use the site, and so could teacher educators. As it turned out, a number of teacher educators used the teachers’ videos in their preservice classes to *show* what good practice looks like. The videos also served as examples for other teachers in different subject areas and grade levels. Moreover, we found that the teachers who experienced the process of creating videos and Web sites became very articulate about their practice, and a number of them went on to become leaders in their schools.

These are three examples, among many, of the formal and informal leadership positions that teachers assume. Without teachers providing collegial leadership, there will be little improvement in schools. With teachers as leaders, there will be collaborative, facilitative, and ongoing teacher transformation! ■

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- Former President of the American Educational Research Association (AERA)
- Former Senior Scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching
- Invited to Laureate Chapter in 1995

What are your areas of expertise and interest? Teacher leadership and development; collaborative research, networks, and school–university partnerships; problems and prospects for understanding educational change.

How do you recharge yourself professionally? I have always loved working with others, so it is not surprising that collaboration is one of the areas of my involvement. I am working with younger people helping them get published, and find this very exciting and an important way to use what I have learned over the years.

How do you balance your professional and personal life? I have most of the time been aware that my personal life is as important as my professional life. Of course, sometimes I have been overloaded, but I have felt that making the effort is worth it and, to a great extent, I have tried to keep a semblance of balance.

Recent Work

Lieberman, A., and L. D. Friedrich, eds. 2010. *How teachers become leaders: Learning from practice and research*. New York: Teachers College Press.

