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AGENTS OF CHANGE: TEACHER LEADERS STRENGTHEN LEARNING FOR THEIR STUDENTS, THEIR COLLEAGUES, AND THEMSELVES

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Within the United States, and throughout much of the world, we have been in a state of reforming education for the past forty years. Some of those reforms have seen real shifts of policy and practice. But often, large-scale reform movements that have been promoted with much hype at the administrative level have resulted in little change in the daily lives of students and teachers working inside classrooms. Researchers and historians who study education reform have increasingly come to recognise that long-term improvement is less likely to occur from the grand scheme announced in halls of government and more likely to come from sustained and sustainable efforts at individual school sites with teachers working collaboratively to respond to the specific needs of their students and constraints of their contexts (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Elmore, 2004). This is the long, hard work of educational change that demands persistence, patience, and vision on the part of teachers and leaders.

Within this environment, teacher leaders are uniquely positioned to promote change. Working alongside their colleagues, teacher leaders are able to share the example of their own work, to build trusting relationships that open space for hard conversations, and to dedicate the time needed to mentor colleagues in reforming practice. *“Whereas Principals can shape teachers’ beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours, other teachers do shape them ... [Teacher leaders] draw on their relationships and their strong sense of purpose to help colleagues explore, share, and improve the practices they use daily with students”* (Donaldson, 2007, p. 28). Engaging teachers as change agents not only extends the Principal’s capacity for leadership (Barth, 2001); it also ensures that the change is authentic and appropriate to the context; that it is responsive to the needs of teachers and students; and that it will endure beyond the scope of an individual Principal’s tenure or central office reform initiative.

To explore the concept of teacher leaders as agents of change this article supplements a discussion of research findings with the voices of two teachers, Rob and Jennifer. Both high school teachers in Southern California, these two teachers are positioned as leaders within their schools. Jennifer teaches at a larger comprehensive high school and holds a formal leadership position as the chair of the English department and has also been identified by the Principal as the Digital Teacher Leader at her school site. The staff at Jennifer’s school tends to be somewhat more established, have more years in the classroom, and can be a bit more resistant to change. Rob teaches at a small redesign school created eight years ago in response to a reform movement prioritising small learning communities and theme-based high schools. The staff at his school tends to be a bit younger with a few years less experience, and have demonstrated that they are more likely to embrace change. Rob’s role as a teacher leader is informal (Danielson, 2007), he holds no official position or title, but his leadership within the school is well established and he is recognised by both the Principal and his colleagues as having significant influence. Both Rob and Jennifer have been in the

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classroom for just over fifteen years, with more than half of that time spent at their current school sites.

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

By virtue of being both teachers and leaders, teacher leaders have the opportunity to lead by example. They are able to demonstrate support for the vision of change and model the process of breathing life into that vision through their work, implementing new approaches and new learning in their own classrooms. While a Principal is necessarily distanced from the day-to-day work of teaching by administrative responsibilities, and an external expert may not have an understanding of the particulars of the school context, a teacher leader at the school site is uniquely positioned to be able to share what they do in their own classroom and speak from experience. In the egalitarian culture that dominates most schools, teacher leaders can gain credibility from their colleagues when they remain in the classroom and work for change from within (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Donaldson, 2007).



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A large part of Jennifer’s success as a teacher leader at her school has derived from her work with technology in her own classroom. An early adopter by nature, Jennifer agreed to pilot the district’s one-to-one laptop program prior to full implementation. Her work piloting the program meant that when the full-scale roll out occurred Jennifer was poised to help her colleagues with everything from technical challenges to the pedagogical shifts that the technology adoption was designed to support. *“I spend a lot of my designated tech time talking to people about curriculum and direction and I use the technology as a lens to guide thinking about curriculum. I’m not going around teaching teachers how to make better PowerPoints; I’m teaching teachers how to use Google docs to help students collaborate with one another.”* By exploring the use of technology in her own classroom, Jennifer was ready with models, strategies, examples, and understanding to lead her colleagues. Being able to speak from experience, and having students who could tout the success of what was happening in her classroom, provided her with credibility in the eyes of her peers.

Rob similarly notes that his leadership is predicated on his continuing role as a classroom teacher. Initially reluctant to step forward to lead because he didn’t want to be seen as *“crossing that line where other teachers would think I was tooting my own horn or being spotlighted as someone doing something better than them”*, Rob’s role as a teacher leader emerged through interactions with colleagues as they planned curriculum and evaluated student work. Without a formal position, teacher leadership for Rob means *“having an open door policy where everybody knows that they can always come in and watch me teach. They can always come in on their prep time and ask a question, get help with their planning.”* He notes that being in his own classroom is essential because he can share his own successes and challenges and be relatable as someone who is *“in the trenches”* with his colleagues.

In addition to modeling teaching practices in the classroom, teacher leaders also are uniquely positioned to model the behaviours of teachers willing to engage in the change process. When a colleague suggested that their high school should restructure the existing graded English classes into mixed ability groupings, the initial support by Jennifer and a few key colleagues generated willingness from more reluctant teachers to consider the approach and participate in the discussion. At his school, Rob works to create a space for conversations to take place that can address teachers’ struggles by modeling his own reflection process and inviting feedback. *“I talk a lot about my own struggles and the growth areas I have so that people don’t see me on a pedestal but they can actually let down their own defences and see that, ‘Oh man, Rob’s still growing and he’s struggling with some of the same things I am’, and that way we sort of generate some solutions together rather than my coming in as the expert and saying ‘here’s what I think you should do.’”*



This behaviour modeling approach is essential if teacher leaders are to exert influence in shaping teacher engagement and promoting change. Research suggests that teachers, next to students, are the most powerful influence on their colleagues and that the work of teacher leaders can trump the efforts of policy makers or administrators to change practice (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Spillane, 2006). Johnson and Donaldson (2007) note that the *“traditional norms of teaching - autonomy, egalitarianism, and seniority - exert a powerful and persistent influence on the work of teachers. They reinforce the privacy*



of the individual's classroom, limit the exchange of good ideas among colleagues, and suppress efforts to recognise expert teaching" (p. 13). By modeling instead the behaviour of a learner, inviting feedback, acknowledging struggles, and engaging with teachers as co-participants in the process of on-going improvement, teacher leaders can shift the culture of expectations and participation in the change process.

RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Working alongside colleagues, teacher leaders rely on a relational approach to leadership in order to create change. They are often not in a position of authority, and even those who do have some administrative powers are unlikely to be in the role of evaluators. They cannot make teachers do what they say; rather they need to persuade them to engage. *"Teacher leaders must enlist colleagues to support their vision, build consensus among diverse groups of educators, and convince others of the importance of what they are proposing"* (Danielson, 2007, p. 15). The success of this approach is largely dependent upon the strength of the relationships they build with their colleagues.

Jennifer notes that she spends *"90 per cent of my day talking to people."* Those conversations are a lynchpin of her leadership in the department. *"People will talk to me differently one-on-one than they will in a group ... I probably talk to everyone in my department at least once a week. And if I haven't talked to them in a while I just pop into their room with a can of compressed air and pretend I'm there to clean something and see how things are going."*

Rob comments that much of what he does is about opening doors and providing *"lots of invitation"*. *"I emphasise that the work is open to everyone. Sometimes I'll go to a specific teacher and say, we've had some great conversations and I think it would be super cool if you joined us."* He goes on to note that because he's not in a position of authority, the relationship can be grounded in trust. *"There's the sense that, we're in the trenches together. We're planning together; we can observe one another's classes; we look at student work together ... And because I'm not officially evaluating them it gives them the sense that they can be more vulnerable without it coming back at them."*

Peer collaboration is critical to the success of relational leadership. The conversations that take place shouldn't just be between the teacher leader and his or her colleagues, rather they need to be within professional learning communities that are nurtured and guided by the teacher leader. Michael Fullan (2007) writes, *"The litmus test of all leadership is whether it mobilises people's commitment to putting their energy into actions designed to improve things. It is individual commitment, but above all it is collective mobilisation"* (p. 9). Encouraging teachers to work together spreads the work more broadly and ensures that the impact of change will endure beyond the tenure of an individual leader.

Both Rob and Jennifer have been active in cultivating collaborative learning communities at their sites either through departments or through grade level teams. They note that these collaborations have helped ensure that all or nearly all teachers are engaged, even those who might have been initially reluctant or resistant. Teachers at Jennifer's school, for example, nearly all adopted blogs as a way to communicate with their students and parents through social media. *"The late adopters saw the impact it was having for their colleagues and they didn't want to be the only one in their grade level who wasn't using it. There's a lot of peer pressure. Not in a 'you better use this' kind of way but in a 'you've got a blog and you've got a blog and you've got a blog ... OK I better get a blog'."*

Rob works with his interdisciplinary grade level planning team to provide opportunities to plan collaboratively, assess student work together, and reflect together. He notes that sharing within the team can lower some of the resistance because *"you can share in a way that says we don't do this perfectly but here's what we're trying and then ask what do you guys do in your classrooms?"* He notes that a critical element of teacher leadership is facilitating hard conversations within the learning community. *"A few years ago there was one member of our team who had significantly different expectations for students than the rest of us. Without directly attacking that teacher, we found ways to look at student work together and help everyone realise the discrepancy and talk through how to bridge the divide."* His observation is that everyone benefited from that conversation and the understanding it provided. *"By the end of that year we were all expecting more of our students and we had moved the needle on what rigour looks*



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EMPOWERING TEACHER LEADERS

To fully realise their potential as change agents, teacher leaders need to be supported within the school and beyond. Many schools and districts talk about teacher leadership but relatively few have successfully created a space for teachers to successfully take on leadership roles (Johnson & Donaldson, 2007). Five critical supports for effective teacher leadership are as follows:

“Teacher leaders need to be trusted to make decisions and empowered to lead change efforts related to the larger school vision.”



“The opportunity to create change that will benefit students is the primary motivator that prompts teachers to step up to leadership roles.”

1. Shared vision – Teacher leaders and school leaders need to share the vision for change and where possible, that vision needs to be developed together. Jennifer comments, *“I’m very happy working for the Principal I have. I changed schools to follow her. I took a leap and moved from middle school to high school because I believe in her leadership and her vision for change.”* A shared vision allows teacher leaders to do the hard work of leadership and to advocate for change that is responsive to that vision.
2. Autonomy and trust – Teacher leaders need to be trusted to make decisions and empowered to lead change efforts related to the larger school vision. Rob comments, *“Our Principal has made it possible to lead by giving us a lot of freedom and real decision making power around issues of curriculum, instruction, and our professional learning. She is not micromanaging our team meetings. She is not micromanaging our projects. She will check in, but the trust she has demonstrated really allows our leaders on campus to step up because there is this sense of empowerment.”*
3. Structures to support teacher teaming – Organising teachers into professional learning communities through department or grade level teams and providing concrete structures such as common prep time and meeting protocols opens up locations for teacher leaders to share their work, lead collaborative planning, and facilitate discussions that promote change. Rob observes that organising a master schedule to allow for that time can be challenging, especially with so many competing demands on teacher and administrator time but he believes that common preps and paid summer planning time have been critical to the growth he has seen in the school. *“Creating that space for teachers to really share with one another, to present to one another, to critique perhaps some student work in their meetings is powerful.”*
4. Release time – Providing teacher leaders with strategic release time allows them to engage with the work of leadership while staying grounded in their role as teacher. Jennifer notes that her Principal has given her an extra release period which allows her to be at three different grade level prep meetings each week. *“That gives me a lot of access to the people that I need to be talking to in order to facilitate the change that is happening in their classrooms.”*
5. External networks – Teacher leaders need to be able to step outside of their local context *“in order to consider ways to improve the very schools and system within which they work”* (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996, p. 41). When teacher leaders access external networks they gain new ideas and perspectives to share with their colleagues at the school site and they also gain sustenance from others doing the hard work of relational leadership. Both Rob and Jennifer network beyond their school through chapters of the National Writing Project, by teaching at a local university, and through regional and national conferences. Jennifer, a 2011 participant in the Google Teacher Academy and an active Twitter user comments, *“those things give me credibility with the teachers at my site and they also give me the opportunity to continue to learn about what I need to know more about so that I can lead at my site.”*

SUSTAINING TEACHER LEADERS

Stepping into a leadership position as a teacher is risky. There is the risk of alienating colleagues, the concern that you may not receive support from administrators, and the time spent away from your own classroom, students, and families. In most cases, there are few tangible rewards that come with taking on additional leadership responsibilities, no added pay and limited advancement options. So why then, do some teachers choose to step into leadership roles and become agents of change? The answers provide guidelines for identifying future teacher leaders and also for sustaining those currently in leadership roles.



1. Teacher leaders want to do right by students – True teacher leaders demonstrate a strong moral commitment to doing what is right for children (Lieberman & Miller, 2004). The opportunity to create change that will benefit students is the primary motivator that prompts teachers to step up to leadership roles. Acknowledging his own initial reticence to move into a leadership role, Rob commented that what ultimately motivated him to take on leadership responsibilities was the opportunity to create positive change for students. *“For me it is not about power or control. I step up if I think my voice can make a difference.”* Jennifer similarly voiced initial reluctance to take on a leadership role noting, *“I still prefer to work with kids, but I can’t stand watching adults not move forward because it affects the children around them.”*
2. Teacher leaders derive satisfaction from mentoring – Teacher leaders extend their work in the classroom to mentoring their colleagues, deriving satisfaction from their success and accomplishments. Rob comments, *“I just think I am wired to mentor. What makes it fulfilling to me is getting to walk with a teacher or a group of teachers over time and see growth with them ... To see them growing day-by-day and week-by-week and to see the snapshot of, man, this is where you were in September and look at how much more capable you are in December and what a difference that makes for students. That stuff keeps me going.”*
3. Teacher leaders grow in their own practice – When teachers are engaged in the work of leadership they become more aware of their own practice and grow in their instructional, professional, and organisational understandings (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Rob notes, *“Stepping up as a leader has caused me to clarify my thinking and deepen my knowledge in so many ways so that I can explain what I’m doing and why I’m doing it. As a teacher leader I am constantly learning and getting feedback from people. I am enriched by my interactions with my colleagues.”*

Across the country and around the world there are many teachers, like Rob and Jennifer, poised to step up and lead change in their schools and communities. Empowering them to do so brings the potential for lasting change that improves learning opportunities for their students, colleagues, and themselves. Teacher leaders are uniquely positioned to be agents of change and, when they share a vision and are willing to share their voices, they can be powerful forces for strengthening practice and enhancing learning.

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