EDUCATION WEEK TEACHER

FIRST PERSON

Why We Need to Rethink Teacher Leadership

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Over the past few years, I have learned from and been inspired by teachers across the country—those who have led social justice movements, published books, run for office, or started nonprofits. I have seen how a single teacher can transform education. But this kind of leadership isn't limited to those teachers who have earned official leadership designations or amassed large Twitter followings. There are also those teachers who lead from within their classrooms and schools without attention and official recognition. These are the teachers who ask pointed questions, make classroom decisions counter to the status quo for the good of their students, and seek to provide quality education no matter how it might impact their reputation.

But I worry that what is often considered "true" teacher leadership is in service of the educational system as it is or becomes about the prestige of titles bestowed upon teachers from traditional educational leaders. I worry that defining teacher leadership in terms of specialized titles makes educators who are not labeled "leaders" feel as if they are not doing enough.

Real teacher leaders are the ones who refuse to let themselves, their schools, their students, their colleagues, and education as a whole stagnate. Here are several lessons I've learned from real teacher leaders who model practices I try to emulate every day.

Teacher leaders don't ask for permission.

Teachers want to please. We want to do what's right, and we want to be praised for doing it. I have spent most of my career—12 years in the classroom—with this mentality, and it meant a lot of time waiting for permission from administrators whenever I had a new innovative idea I wanted to try. I wanted approval for trying a new strategy or acceptance when I approached curricula from a different perspective. I felt alone and frustrated because it seemed like no one understood my way of thinking.

But then I took the advice of a colleague, whose no-nonsense attitude is one I admire. She told me to stop asking for permission to do what I felt was right. And I did. Soon I didn't feel alone anymore. Colleagues wanted to share their ideas with me once they knew I was trying my own.

Teacher leaders keep knocking on closed doors.

At the same time, real teacher leaders don't worry about people who might question their attempts to speak with school leaders about their ideas. At my own schools, there is a perpetuating theory that teachers who spend too much time in the office are brown-nosers or opportunists. What that myth does is prevent teachers with good ideas from sharing them because they worry about the impression it will make. There were many times when I had an idea—programming for the whole sophomore class or a new way to approach disciplinary literacy—but held onto it out of fear that the administrators were too busy. Or that it wasn't that great of an idea. Or that they—and my fellow teachers—wouldn't support me.

In reality, most administrators want to support teachers; they just try to think of logical (and logistical) ways to make their big ideas a reality. An initial lack of response might just be the administrator's way of thinking through an idea. And so what if other teachers think you're opportunistic? You'll be the one seeking opportunities for meaningful change.

Teacher leaders take pride in their work—without feeling like they're bragging.

There's also a perpetuating theory that teachers who lead and show off that leadership are braggarts. There is a tacit code in schools that teachers should be humble and self-sacrificing. Good teacher leaders do carry a strong sense of humility, but it's important to recognize what we do well and not be afraid to voice our strengths.

In his book *Teach Like a Pirate*, the author Dave Burgess says that we all want (or should want) to be great. There's nothing wrong with being open about the things we do well. I have learned to accept that I am a big-picture person and that details are not my strong suit. I don't feel embarrassed talking about a creative lesson idea I had because in the same breath, I will also be honest that a lesson flopped because I didn't plan the details well.

Teacher leaders understand that leading is often lonely.

There will be moments when someone will cut you off mid-sentence and make you feel like you're not in the room. There will be times when you have a great idea and can see it through to its end in your mind, but someone rejects it before you have the chance to explain. And there will be times when you're walking into work wondering what the heck you're doing, and what gives you the right to think you can teach or lead—or both. I've been there. I'm still there. But good teacher leaders embrace that loneliness. When they're interrupted, they speak up again. When they question themselves, they find someone who believes in them.

Teacher leaders embrace vulnerability.

I used to feel like I needed to pretend I knew all the answers. I thought that if I questioned a lesson or worried about my own abilities openly, even to myself, I would lose the respect of my administration, colleagues, and students. I stumbled through a lesson that wasn't working because I didn't want to admit I'd planned a dud. I didn't voice opinions in faculty meetings because I thought it might expose

me as a fraud who didn't really know what she was talking about. But as soon as I learned that kids perk up when a teacher says she's wrong and that teachers respect other teachers who voice their thoughts and questions openly, I started doing it all the time. Being open and genuine brings more opportunities and true friends.

Teacher leaders surround themselves with multiple perspectives.

Getting input from others will make your own work and leadership stronger. I like far-fetched ideas, and sometimes it’s frustrating when a more practical teacher seemingly shoots them down with one question: "How exactly will that work?" I used to harbor resentment, feeling as though practical teachers just don't get it. It was a cycle that prevented me from engaging in honest collaborative relationships with my colleagues and embracing the power that comes from multiple perspectives—until I finally decided to try and answer that question. Most of the time, that practical person also had some good strategies of her own for how to make my crazy idea a reality for both of our classrooms.

The truth is that the art of teaching is often out of our control. We try to regulate it with titles and roles and promotions and plans, but we never will be able to find a formula that solves all the problems. We may never earn recognition for our leadership in the way that we wish or feel we deserve. But if there's anything close to a formula, it is in the hands of the teachers—the ones loud enough, bold enough, and strong enough to embrace the role of a true teacher leader.

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