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Two Ways to Lead

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Collaborative and activist leadership enable teachers to share their talents and knowledge and learn from peers.

How are teachers constructing their roles as leaders in schools today? One popular model is to identify certain teachers as particularly successful, and then have others learn from them. But there is another way, a way that looks at leadership as a quality that we all have and can all develop. In this model, which I call collaborative leadership, the goal is not to figure out who is best. Instead, teachers share their unique talents and interests and learn from one another. This can take a variety of forms, including teacher inquiry, as we find in Oakland, California, or social activism, as we find in Chicago, Illinois.

Oakland: Leadership as Collaborative Inquiry

Building on Uncertainty

The [Mills Teacher Scholars](#) is a program of the Mills College School of Education in Oakland, California. Teachers, who must apply to participate, conduct a yearlong research project into an aspect of student learning and meet regularly with a team of fellow teacher scholars at their school or at Mills College to discuss their research. The program works with more than 90 K–12 teachers in 14 schools as they learn together.

Anna Richert, the founder of the Mills Teacher Scholars, often says, "Teaching is uncertain work." This uncertainty creates a powerful framework for the group's work. Because every class and every student are likely to present fresh dilemmas with no clear answer, participants start each year with an inquiring mind. They are not trying to repeat what they did the year before or follow any script to achieve success. They remain flexible and open to learning who their students are and how best to teach them. This attitude makes their work a puzzle that they and their students try to solve every day.

For the past three years, seven teachers of a staff of 15 at New Highland Academy in Oakland have participated in monthly collaborative meetings as Mills Teacher Scholars. At the start of the year, they brainstorm to make a list of questions that will be the focus of their inquiries. With help from Mills Teacher Scholars staff, they consider how they can gather the information they need through examining data, observing one another's classrooms, looking closely at student work, and listening to what students are saying. They then share their insights with one another and the rest of the school staff to inform the teaching across the school.

One of their first inquiries began when teachers saw that their students were learning to decode well, but data were

showing that their comprehension was weak. Third grade teacher Aija Simmons decided to investigate the use of comprehension strategies with her students. She and her grade-level partner, Channon Jackson, had students use a set of codes that asked them to engage in the text by predicting, substituting synonyms for unknown words, analyzing figurative language, and summarizing as they read. Simmons said,

Every time I sat down to discuss the data with my colleagues ..., my reading instruction was shaped by what I saw. ... My reading instruction was no longer moving through the stories in an anthology or following along with a mandated pacing guide. My students were shaping the pace and skills I was teaching. We were exploring many different genres and reading many different types of texts. Patterns of skills were emerging, and not only were my students growing as readers but I was becoming a better teacher every day. I was amazed at how creative I was able to become.

Simmons and Jackson shared this approach with other colleagues, and the next year these strategies were in use across the school. As a result, in 2011, 45 percent of the students achieved proficiency in comprehension, up from 7 percent a few years earlier.

Giving Students a Voice

When teachers engage in inquiry, they are activating a dialogue with their students that might not otherwise exist. Because their starting point is one of curiosity and openness, there is room for students to be themselves and to play an active role in solving the learning dilemmas that emerge in classrooms.

This sort of inquiry takes on special meaning when it is transparent to the students. Simmons described how this rescued her one day:

When the kids know you're engaged in this inquiry and you're tinkering, it can help. One year, I was like, "Kids, I can't figure it out! I have tried this and that." And one of the students said, "Ms. Simmons, you are waiting too long to give us a review. Come on, now! That's why we can't get it. We haven't done that in three weeks." So I started doing these random mixed reviews. We were doing so much teaching in isolation that when it was time to shift their brains to something else, the students were like, "I can't. I'm stuck right here. When did we do that?"

The inquiry process has teachers looking at their students and thinking, *I wonder if they are getting this. I wonder what else we could try.* When students perceive this, they can become active partners in their own learning.

Owning the Process

Teacher leaders are sometimes defined as those individuals who have proven they have special abilities and are thus worthy of being followed. The teachers engaged in this inquiry process see every group member as helping to lead. These teachers are the experts in their school, and they make professional decisions based on their knowledge. As Simmons noted,

One of the things that makes this powerful and different is the sense that teachers have a professional voice; we know a little bit about what we're doing in our classrooms with our kids. So we're not just saying, "I don't like this program; I don't want to do it." We're going in saying, "The data are showing me that this aspect is not working for my kids." And we can say, "Here's my student work. Here's how I know it's not working." When you go in with the evidence ... it gives you a lot more power.

One of the side effects of this sort of inquiry is the trust and communication that are built across the school. As Simmons observed, "The nature of teaching is that you go in your room and do all these amazing things, and you might get lucky if anyone saw any of it." As a 3rd grade teacher, she had rarely looked at work from the 1st grade, but through this collaboration, she was looking at it regularly and developing a better sense of her students' prior knowledge. New Highland Academy principal Liz Ozol explained that the Mills Teacher Scholars' work on literacy "set the stage for our entire school to focus on reading comprehension strategies. It affected all the teachers at our school."

Although the principals who work with the Mills Teacher Scholars honor the work these teachers are doing, they do not score it as part of their evaluation process. Moyra Contreras, principal of Melrose Leadership Academy in Oakland, explained, "Teachers hold themselves accountable. It's much more effective than me going in and writing an evaluation. When you have a top-down evaluation process, then people pretend they are doing what you want them to do." She found it more beneficial to give teachers the opportunity and responsibility to make choices that worked for them and their students.

Chicago: Leadership as Social Activism

Responding to "Reform"

In Chicago, a challenging reform environment has provoked teachers to pursue a different path. These teachers found

that to preserve their professional autonomy and serve their students well, their leadership needed to take on some new dimensions.

Michelle Strater Gunderson has taught early elementary in the city for the past 26 years. She said that, until fairly recently, her leadership was rooted in her classroom, and her professional development centered on balanced literacy. Several years ago, however, new fast-track mentorship programs for principals brought in leaders who seemed to have a negative view of tenured teachers, seeing them, Gunderson said, "as sticks in the mud ... the ones holding down the system. This made teacher work so stressful that it was impossible to do well."

As the "reforms" took hold, the leadership began to micromanage teachers' classrooms and professional lives:

The heart and soul of what we do as teachers was taken out. Evaluations became overly critical about minutia. They came to us with this sense of wanting to be cooperative with teachers, forming all kinds of committees, but these committees became hardships and ways of directing people. Instead of thinking of a faculty as a group of independent professionals who co-construct knowledge, we were being told what our job was.

Gunderson began thinking about how to protect the collaborative environment she knew was a prerequisite for productive work at her school. She saw that if teachers were not willing to stand together, with the help of their union, the space for autonomous collaboration would be lost.

In September 2012, after negotiating for more than 11 months, the Chicago Teachers Union went on strike for seven days. According to Illinois state law, the issues that the union could legally strike on were pay, benefits, and evaluation. Yet many of the teachers who formed the picket lines were also concerned with social justice issues for their students. As a result of organizing by Gunderson and fellow activists, her school was united during the September 2012 strike.

Gunderson's work with a caucus of early childhood educators allowed the teachers' concerns to be well represented in negotiations. One of the most important issues discussed was the attachment of teacher evaluation to test scores. The Illinois legislature passed measures that required evaluation to be tied to quantitative measures, but the union was able to ensure that the percentage of the evaluations tied to such measures would be the minimum allowed by the law.

However, their most important accomplishment was building a structure within the union through which most schools in Chicago now have a union delegate and a committee to address professional problems inside their buildings. Through these structures, teachers can now work to enforce their hard-won contract. A contract without the structure to enforce it is worthless. Gunderson and fellow activists continue to work to oppose school closings and budget cuts in Chicago.

Leading with Others

Collaborative leadership, which is an important part of activist leadership, is different from hierarchical models in that you might enter a meeting and be unable to even detect who the leader is. Chicago high school history teacher Xian Barrett describes his model of leadership as *bidirectional*, meaning that "even as you are leading someone in some way, or supporting them, they are doing the same for you, or have the potential to do that for you." He said,

That is very opposite of a traditional leadership model, where you look across a crowd of people and find a leader and elevate them. ... Everyone is a potential leader, and we all have leadership in ourselves that manifests in different ways, and we are going to empower and cultivate that in everyone. That is a fundamental principle of any potentially successful social justice movement.

Barrett has served as a Teacher Ambassador Fellow with the U.S. Department of Education, a program that gives teachers experience interacting with policymakers. He believes that educators need to be the primary voices at the table in discussions about education reform, with places also for students and parents. "If big corporate funders who are not directly involved in public education would like to be at the table, they can sit at the table, but they should not have the lead voice at that table."

Giving Teachers the Power

To create the space for collaborative leadership, we must have confidence in teachers. Principals must honor teachers' ability to drive their own professional development and choose the form of growth that will work for them. Processes like teacher inquiry, lesson study, critical friends, or the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards's Take One professional learning model can be of great help in providing structure and protocols for the collaborative work. But teachers must have autonomy and choice in determining which process they will follow and how they will pursue their projects.

It is also crucial that there be some stability at a school. Beginning teachers can gain a great deal by participating in these processes, but there needs to be a reservoir of stability and expertise for this work to unfold. Small class sizes give teachers the time and energy they need to look at students as individuals. And teachers must have dedicated, paid time for collaborative work like this.

The teacher inquiry work in Oakland is superficially different from the leadership Gunderson and Barrett describe in Chicago. However, in both places, teachers are seeking to create an active dialogue with students and peers. Their expertise does not come from a place of certain knowledge, but from hard-won insights that are the result of active investigation. They do not begin from a place of thinking they have the answers to impart to their followers, whether they be peers or even students. Collaborative leadership is not about hierarchies or establishing who is best. Leadership is a quality we all have within, and the wisest leaders may actually do less leading as they create space around them for others to develop and grow.

Author's note: Quotes from Mills Teacher Scholars were taken from recordings I made on May 21, 2013, at the group's Teacher Inquiry in Action Forum, in Oakland, California. Quotes from Gunderson and Barrett were from phone interviews I conducted on May 28, 2013. Barrett was among the 2,100 teachers laid off by Chicago Public Schools in July 2013.

Video Bonus

To learn more about the work of the Mills Teacher Scholars, watch the [videos](#).

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