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Leadership In My Life

Throughout one’s life there will be many leaders. As a child, these leaders were the authority figures: the teacher, the principal, parents, officials, and their power existed without question. In elementary school we all learned about the US Presidents and early research assignments often included reports given on great leaders in history. As we moved through our secondary education, great leaders in history continued to be a favorite research topic, but we were asked to look at these people through a much more critical lens, moving from what they accomplished, to why and how they achieved such power. Today, individuals are making a living instructing others about leadership qualities, and many educational institutions and companies are developing programs geared toward enhancing leadership skills. Although I’m not a fan of Wikipedia, I liked what one contributor posted when they defined leadership as “a process of social influence in which one person can enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task.” At the heart of leadership is the idea of community, and although many leaders may forget this, good leadership starts with an attitude of service always keeping in mind those we work for. A good leader understands the significance of the position he or she has been given and the need for contributions by others. Character traits such as expertise, awareness, intuitiveness, humility, perseverance, and a call to serve are all qualities found in those who can be considered true leaders.

If you think about it, our first glimpses of leadership occur in our first days of school. Our kindergarten teachers provide us with our initial understandings of what a leader looks like, and the importance of leadership; therefore, it is of a necessity that we, as a culture, begin to view teachers as leaders. Of course, along with this responsibility comes the awareness of the charge we have been given, and we need to be fully competent in order to fulfill that obligation. Katzenmeyer and Moller, in their book, *Awakening the Sleeping giant: Helping Teachers Develop as Leaders,* cite a study by Snell and Swanson. This study found that “expertise [was] the foundational dimension of teacher leadership, for it served to establish the credibility of these teachers as exemplars, which, thereby opened the door for them to function as instructional leaders”(102). I believe that this expertise is not only developed from instruction, but also from craft knowledge. Teaching is never static. It is a dynamic profession that differs from day to day and class to class. Craft knowledge does not just simply come from logging hours, but it comes from the reflection and refraction that occurs after those hours have been logged. A full understanding of the learning that is happening on a student-by-student basis requires going beyond reflection. For Dr. Carol Pope, this analysis is done through a process in which “[she has] found that for me reflecting is not enough. It is what I make of this thinking that matters in teaching, the changes, alterations, adjustments I make that have the final impact . . . I have to do more than hold a mirror to myself and the class; I have to turn the mirror to see the class from different angles” (180). Our teacher leadership videos provided perfect examples of many educators who employed this process to better serve their student. The film, *Freedom Writers,* gives the viewer an excellent visual representation of how a teacher turns her experience into craft knowledge by viewing her students through different lenses. This work is difficult and humbling as we realize that we are part of a profession in which we must challenge ourselves to never settle, but to always look for ways to improve. Only by maintaining a level of expertise can we be fully successful in our classrooms; therefore, establishing credibility is essential for successful teacher leadership.

Teaching does not exist in a bubble, nor does any single classroom operate in a vacuum. Schools are communities, and understanding and working with the culture that exists in the community is essential for good teacher leadership. So often this semester our discussion and our reading has focused on ways in which we can establish ourselves as teacher leaders particularly when the culture is not one that values teachers in that capacity. One must have knowledge of the culture of their environment before setting out to make positive change. Katzenmeyer and Moller elaborate on the idea of culture by providing us with a definition: “’Culture is the underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that has built up over times as people work together, solve problems and confront challenges’ . . . A positive culture within a school fosters teacher leadership, which in turn produces positive results in student outcomes”(84). A healthy and supportive school culture is important, but so often we find ourselves working in schools that are not conducive to promoting teacher leadership. Therefore, teacher leaders often must take it upon themselves to work within the existing culture. Teaching is much more effective if it is built upon an established relationship between students and teachers. It would make sense then, that teacher leadership is also founded on establishing relationships with other professionals. In fact, “these relationships between teacher leaders and other teachers are critical to building a professional community of learners and leaders within the school” (Katzenmeyer and Moller, 90). In many ways, this starts when you “open the classroom door” (Zemelman and Ross), and invite others in, not to show what great things are happening in our classrooms, although that too needs to be shared, but to invite collaboration. The idea of collegiality is one that should be fostered in schools, and often starts with a single conversation. Understanding the community in which one teaches is important if one is going to make a positive impact on the culture of that community.

Finally, a consistent idea found within the definition of teacher leadership is that teacher leaders *must* lead. The stakes are too high otherwise. As Katzenmeyer and Moller suggest, “Perhaps the answers to concerns about education rest in the potential of a leadership structure that taps into everyone’s talents with the school community, especially the teachers . . . The notion of the principal as the only leader is evolving into a clearer understanding of the leadership roles that teachers must take if our schools are to be successful” (2). Shifting attitudes within the educational community in order to understand the effectiveness of teacher leaders in creating impactful change is essential to reform. As teacher leaders, we must model the life-long attitude of learning we are trying to instill in our children. As Barth explains, “if we are really committed to developing communities of learning, we must engage in activities that have the capacity to build community and to promote learning and a lifetime love of learning” (40). We must push ourselves to provide both the information and the experience to our students, be willing to share that with others, and to gain that experience ourselves through our endeavors to become teacher leaders within our communities.

Looking forward, I know my leadership Plan of Action will change over the years, but I have established a few goals to get me started. After dabbling a bit with leadership positions in the past, and becoming increasingly frustrated with the politics that often accompany leadership positions, I realize I need to start with focusing on those aspects of my job I am truly passionate about, my classroom and community service. This year, I have completely reworked one of my senior Engish classes so that it is truly an exercise in independent learning. I have given the students the control over what they want to learn and the ways in which they would like to do so. I have rarely talked about this class with my colleagues, although it has given me the most joy I have felt in my teaching in a long time. My first goal is to present to the faculty about this course and discuss what has been successful and what has not and share with them some of the amazing student work that has come from this class. My second goal is to work with our Service Coordinator to establish a Community Service Committee at our school to look at the effectiveness of our program and find ways in which we can make it a more impactful and integral part of our school community. I am sure, as I try to move forward, that I will once again run into frustrating politics, but at this point, I feel like I have a responsibility to promote a positive change within my community.

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