Leadership As Stance: Leading from Inside the Classroom

Rebecca Van Tassell

Exploring the ways that my view of teacher leadership is enacted during informal interactions between teachers.

Near the end of my fifth year of teaching, on a beautiful spring day, teachers and staff at my high school participated in an in-service day. It was a familiar scene: a day without students in which teachers, curriculum specialists and others led various sessions. I co-led a session with a colleague, attended a number of useful sessions and at the end of the day, gathered with my science department colleagues to share takeaways.

I don't remember what I shared when it was my turn, but a colleague, Joan[1], found me in the hallway as I made my way back to my classroom to pack up for home. She thanked me for what I said because it sparked an idea for her about how to implement group work to make it even more accessible to her students with Individualized Educational Plans. I was surprised that, at the end of a day of carefully planned professional development activities, it was my off-the-cuff statement that had the most impact on Joan's practice.

This interaction made me think about how I'd been approaching teacher leadership. At the time, I was struggling to balance the demands of my leadership role as department coordinator with the myriad demands of teaching. I wanted to be a teacher leader, but I felt unsatisfied with the work I was doing. I wasn't convinced that teacher leadership only came with a formal role or title —it seemed like perhaps leading could happen from the classroom—but I was torn. I liked having a title, a role, a publicly recognized stamp, and I believed that without it, it would be difficult to wield the authority required to make changes to teachers' practice. I wondered, would leading from the classroom feel like leadership? Was being an excellent teacher and serving as a model for others enough to lead educational improvement? I found myself asking: What counts as teacher leadership, and who decides?

Defining Teacher Leadership As Stance

Teacher leadership has been defined differently in the literature, but many researchers agree that teacher leaders are distinguished from other teachers because they influence teaching and learning within and beyond their own classrooms (Wenner & Campbell, 2016). Teacher leaders are typically moved out of their classrooms at least part time so they can take on formal, highly visible roles, such as department chair, curriculum coordinator, or professional development leader. We expect these teacher leaders to have a broad impact, "not just influencing individual teachers, but also having the capability to influence the entire school, community, and profession" (p. 7). Less easy to spot are teacher leaders without titles who influence their colleagues in different but equally powerful ways.

My conception of teacher leadership evolved after my interaction with Joan, thanks in part to the work I did as a Knowles Teaching Fellow. During my fifth year

[1] Teacher name is a pseudonym.

in that community so that I can improve teaching from the inside. Rather than envisioning teacher leadership as a discrete role that is undertaken, or a set of leadership skills to be implemented when working with colleagues, a leadership stance pervades a teacher leader's every interaction and allows for leadership to be enacted throughout the educational setting. Viewing teacher leadership as stance promotes the idea that all teachers have the power to improve education, the capacity to advocate for students, and the ability to influence teaching in their local contexts regardless of their position in school hierarchies.
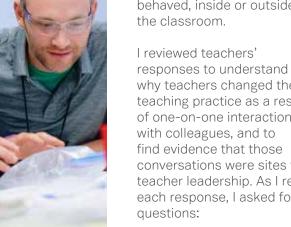
Looking for Models

I decided to explore the ways my expanded view of teacher leadership was being enacted by other teachers during informal interactions with their colleagues. I sent a questionnaire to the Knowles Teaching Fellows community, as well as teachers in my own school, and asked: Describe a time when a small interaction (a conversation, question, or casual exchange of ideas) with a colleague impacted your teaching. What changes to your thinking or student learning have resulted because of this interaction?

In framing my question to teachers in this way, I hoped to elicit data on these interactions without influencing participants' thinking about leadership. My goal was to understand ways these interactions might be depicted as acts of leadership, if they had an influence on the way other teachers thought or behaved, inside or outside of the classroom.

I reviewed teachers' responses to understand why teachers changed their teaching practice as a result of one-on-one interactions with colleagues, and to find evidence that those conversations were sites for teacher leadership. As I read each response, I asked four questions:

in the Fellowship, I was encouraged to re-think ways I identified as a teacher leader in my own context and I came to recognize that my leadership was not limited to the defined role I had or a set of behaviors I was expected to enact. While it was easy to describe opportunities for teacher leadership when looking at formal leadership roles and in school-sanctioned initiatives, such as professional development, it became clear that even without the authority of a formal role we could leverage our relationships with colleagues to bring about change.

Following a 2009 Knowles Fellows' meeting, I began to think of teacher leadership as a stance I take when I work with colleagues. In their work on teacher inquiry, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) describe inquiry as stance as the "positions teachers in inquiry communities . . . take toward knowledge and its relationship to practice" (p. 289). Like Cochran-Smith and Lytle's inquiry stance, I began to understand teacher leadership as a stance that is perspectival and conceptual—a dynamic way of knowing my teaching community and my membership

1. Who influenced the teacher?
2. What were the circumstances of the interaction described by the teacher?
3. What aspect of the teacher's practice was influenced?
4. What prompted the change in teachers' practices?

At each stage of answering these questions, I enlisted the help of Linda Abrams, a Program Officer at the Knowles Teaching Initiative, to look at my data with me to make sure what I was seeing in the data was clear to others.

Who influenced these teachers?

Nine teachers described interactions they had with colleagues who were mentor teachers, cooperating teachers, or assistant principals. I decided to exclude those responses from further analysis because I felt that the authority inherent in their colleagues' roles changed the dynamics of their relationships. I wanted to look exclusively at interactions that did not have this power dynamic at play, which left 11 out of 20 responses to help me understand leadership as a stance one took with their colleagues.

Influential colleagues included "the teacher next door," "another teacher in the building," or "a teacher in my department." Such relationships are proximal: teachers who have ready access to each other because they are in a department meeting together, run into each other in the copy room, or teach nearby. Being part of the same community and teaching the same students under the same conditions allows these teachers to support each other in context-appropriate ways that allow for short, informal interactions to be incredibly rich. Teachers can bypass the cognitive load of trying to understand a problem, a question, or a group of students because they are shared. Proximity allows these interactions to be powerful, with teachers readily available to offer timely and context-appropriate feedback to each other.

What were the circumstances of the interactions teachers described?

As I read through each response, I wanted to understand what was going on when the interaction happened, what the teachers were doing, and where it took place. I found that some teachers sought out colleagues with experience in the same content area to elicit information about pedagogy or course content. A few of those interactions took place in collaborative settings where teachers were working together on curriculum or during a content team meeting. Other interactions were more spontaneous, occurring by the copy machine, in the staff room, or in-between classes. One such interaction allowed a teacher who felt apart from her school community to feel supported, even by a teacher who taught differently from her:

> During my second year teaching, a colleague and I were having a discussion in the copy room about instructional techniques. [Our] brief . . . chat . . .

allowed me to see that there was a teacher who valued the way I was teaching, even though she had a totally different style. . . . [T]hat . . . conversation allowed me to see that . . . we can support each other in the ways we choose to teach!

Many of the teachers described their interactions as informal "suggestions," "mentions," or "nuggets of support," an indication that, despite their casual tone, these conversations were memorable and had a significant impact on some aspect of these teachers' teaching or professional well-being.

What aspect of the teacher's practice was influenced?

In posing this question, I wanted to focus on what teachers were learning from their colleagues. Were they learning new instructional techniques? Did their colleagues have an even greater influence on their conceptual understandings around teaching and learning? I grouped their responses into four content categories: pedagogy, course content, understanding students, and emotional well-being—and found that teachers' thinking and practice were differently impacted.

Some teachers came away with new approaches to teaching. For example, a geometry teacher asked a member of her department to suggest a different approach to teaching equations of circles. She typically taught it with a system of equations because she was more experienced in teaching algebra. The teacher remarked,

> She showed me a more geometric way (constructing perpendicular bisectors to two of the chords and then finding their intersection). I would have never thought of this way, but it was more useful for my students who are visual learners [and] struggle with algebra.

Another teacher described a change in her instructional method. As a first-year teacher, she was unsure how to support student learning by modeling. When she approached a colleague in her department, he responded, "What is that you expect students to do? If you do not show them, how will they ever know?" What seemed obvious to her more-experienced colleague was a revelation to this novice: "It made me understand the importance of being direct, explicit, and detailed in my teaching practice." This teacher developed an understanding of the value of transparency in her teaching for her students' learning.

Teachers were also challenged to reconsider what they were teaching and why they were teaching it.

Interactions with colleagues allowed for exploration of what content was most important for students and prompted questioning about how to provide more meaningful learning experiences for students. A chemistry teacher described a conversation he had with a middle school science teacher who taught next door. When the chemistry teacher answered a basic content question, the colleague asked, "Is that important for my kids to know?" Reflecting on the exchange, the chemistry teacher wrote,

> [T]he second question stuck with me . . . Is the fact that the third orbital can hold eight or eighteen electrons really important? Does it change the understanding of my students or do I cover it because it is a fact that I can easily assess?

Some interactions allowed teachers to gain new insight about the students they were teaching and to uncover assumptions they held about them. A teacher whose computer was stolen shared with a colleague that she was concerned that her students were "quiet… didn't want to participate, [and] angry . . . because I 'told on' their classmate." Her colleague suggested a different interpretation; perhaps the students "felt guilty and ashamed that their classmate stole" the computer. Thanks to her colleague, the teacher was able to to see her students differently and align their morals with her own. She could "see the bias" in her assumptions, deepen her understanding of students in the community, and avoid othering her own students.

Teachers also shared the impact their colleagues had on their emotional well-being by promoting feelings of confidence, providing perspective on a problem and making them more comfortable in their community. One teacher commented, "By supporting my emotional development as a teacher, my colleagues push me to stay in the profession and become a better teacher."

> ❝
> *Interactions with colleagues can challenge teachers to reconsider what they are teaching and why they are teaching it.*"

Kind supportive statements affirmed the importance of teachers' work and their ability to do it. Examples like this speak to the importance of collegial support for teachers' emotional well-being, and its relationship to teacher retention.

What prompted the change in teachers' practices?

Once I identified that these informal interactions between teachers led to changes in teachers' thinking and practice, I looked to the responses a final time to identify the nature of these interactions. I wanted to know what respondents' colleagues did to prompt a change. I identified four behaviors in this final phase of analysis: colleagues made a supportive statement, asked probing questions, made an observation or provided an explanation of pedagogy.

Many teachers cited a supportive statement made by a colleague that affirmed their choices, abilities and value as teachers. Colleagues recognized the difficulty of a teacher's situation and encouraged generosity toward themselves and others. For example, one teacher described feeling a "crisis of confidence" following the birth of their daughter. They turned to a colleague for support and came away for the conversation reassured:

> [My colleague reminded me] whatever I was experiencing in my life, I would grow through it and it would make me a better teacher, a fuller human being. This small interaction is one I keep returning to like a touchstone, and it keeps my heart open.

The colleague's acknowledgement of the teacher's difficulty, which was "said with so much acceptance," offered them a new perspective, helped them to process the emotional difficulty of their situation, and allowed them to find some peace despite its impact on their professional life.

Several interactions started with a probing question that prompted a change in a teacher's thinking. The questions posed by colleagues became opportunities for teachers to examine their practice, to steer their thinking in a new direction, or to inspire them to justify the significance of their curricular choices, as in the example of the chemistry teacher discussed above. Other teachers described scenarios in which a colleague simply noticed something about the teacher or the teacher's practice. These observations uncovered blind spots in the teachers' thinking, allowed them to see the problem in a new way, and inspired them to make adjustments to help them move forward. Another teacher wrote about a course team meeting when one of her colleagues noticed that three of the questions on a quiz the team was writing required one basic skill; if students did not know the skill, they

> *By supporting my emotional development as a teacher, my colleagues push me to stay in the profession and become a better teacher."*

would miss all three questions. The teacher wrote, "This small noticing is now something that I think about every time I assess students." Her reflection speaks to the potentially long lasting impact that relatively small, simple interactions can have on a teacher's thinking.

What I Learned

Responses to my questionnaire suggest that informal interactions between colleagues can result in educational improvement. Even during casual conversations, teachers' thinking and multiple areas of their practice were influenced in significant and lasting ways by colleagues who understood their individual needs, asked just the right questions, and recognized that they could be helpful in the moment. This was possible because teachers and their colleagues had ready access to each other and deep knowledge of the context they both shared. They made the most of small moments and leveraged them as opportunities to influence one another.

At the beginning of this article, I defined teacher leadership as a stance, perspectival and conceptual: a dynamic way of knowing my teaching community and my membership in that community so that I can improve teaching from the inside. What I've seen in these interactions is just this: teachers using their knowledge of their community to prompt change. These teachers have exercised leadership by helping their colleagues make sense of their practice and themselves as teachers to provide the best possible opportunities for students.

According to research, the visibility and presence of teacher leaders in a school community empowers all teachers there (Beachum & Dentith, 2004; Vernon-Dotson & Floyd, 2012). Teachers who are recognized by

their colleagues as leaders, regardless of formal power structures, have the potential to inspire change from the bottom up, working in parallel with other school improvement efforts. In seeing small interactions as potential sites for leadership, we increase the opportunities we have to practice leadership and thus see ourselves as teacher leaders. Thinking about leadership as stance allows for a gradual transformation in a teaching community's practices that are context appropriate and encourage even early-career teachers to see themselves as leaders in smaller ways as they build their capacity, develop their teaching efficacy, and move gradually toward their ideal of teacher leadership.

There has been a surge in attention to preparing early-career teachers for leadership roles in schools. Many institutions include teacher leadership in master's degree coursework or even offer additional certificates in leadership for classroom teachers. However, there is evidence that the transition from classroom teacher to teacher leader is problematic for early-career teachers. In one study of teachers enrolled in graduate coursework in teacher leadership, participants expressed "fear of not being listened to by colleagues and of not being effective at influencing change" (Carver & Meier, 2013, p. 185). Early-career teachers in the study, while acknowledging smaller interactions as acts of leadership, "did not recognize themselves as leaders and continued to privilege the formal and idealized images of leadership to which they aspired" (p. 180). The authors conclude that issues of credibility and approachability are "intractable" aspects of teachers' thinking around teacher leadership (p. 185), which suggests a persistent belief that teacher leadership is something that is practiced in addition to our work in the classroom, and not included in that work. Teachers overlook the daily support and impact their colleagues have on their teaching.

We teachers, novice and experienced, take for granted that our common understanding about where we teach, who we teach, and how to teach can have a positive impact on our profession and open us to the potential and power of our daily, routine interactions. Reconsidering teacher leadership as a stance we can all assume, allows teachers to work across stages in our professional careers and educational contexts and to leverage the power of our relationships. My colleague Joan did not look for our interaction as a specific opportunity to improve her practice. Rather she was open to the possibility of learning from her colleagues at any time. Like Joan, teachers who embrace a leadership stance can move fluidly between having an influence on other teachers and being influenced by them because they recognize expertise and potential in

themselves and their colleagues.

Now What?

For teachers, taking a leadership stance in our contexts creates opportunities to lead in a myriad of ways, from small interactions with colleagues to formal roles and responsibilities. All are opportunities for teachers to have a positive impact on student learning. Thinking about leadership as a stance helps me to understand the ways that I can continue to lead through the ever changing landscape of my career to recognize that all of my collegial interactions are potential sites for teacher leadership, as long as I tune into my colleagues and consider the possibility that the teacher next door has a lot to offer.

References

Beachum, F. & Dentith, A. M. (2004). Teacher leaders creating cultures of school renewal and transformation. *Educational Forum, 68*(3), 276–286.

Carver, C. L. & Meier, J. M. (2013). Gaining confidence, managing conflict: Early career conceptions of teacher leadership during graduate coursework. *The New Educator, 9*(3), 173–191.

Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (2009). *Inquiry as stance: Practitioner research for the next generation*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Vernon-Dotson, L. J., & Floyd, L. O. (2012). Building leadership capacity via school partnerships and teacher teams. *Clearing House, 85*(1), 38–49.

Wenner, J. A. & Campbell, T. (2016). The theoretical and empirical basis of teacher leadership. *Review of Educational Research, 87*(1), 134–171.

Citation

Van Tassell, R. (2017). Leadership as stance: Leading from inside the classroom. *Kaleidoscope: Educator Voices and Perspectives*, *4*(1), 32–37.

Rebecca Van Tassell, *a Senior Fellow, is currently a stay-at-home parent and serves on the editorial staff for Kaleidoscope. She has taught biology and environmental science in Indianapolis, Indiana and Chappaqua, New York. Empowering teachers through writing has emerged as one of her passions, so coaching writers and leading writing workshops keeps her busy in between the many important tasks of motherhood. Becky also enjoys cooking, gardening, playing music and experiencing nature with her family. Reach Becky at rebecca.vantassell@knowlesteachers.org.*