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Melanie Shoffner

Leadership: Honestly, It's Not for Everyone¹

I've been thinking about leadership lately.

It's one of those terms that pops up frequently in education. We focus on developing teacher leaders. We expect teachers to be leaders in their schools. We address leadership in our dispositional assessments of preservice teachers. We offer graduate degrees in educational leadership. We refer to administrators as *the leadership*. Perhaps familiarity breeds confusion, in addition to contempt, because the commonality of the term in the day-to-day of teacher education doesn't necessarily translate into what it is, what it isn't, and what it means.

A dispassionate definition of *leadership* tells me that to lead is to guide, to direct, to conduct, to command, to have charge of (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Passionate personal definitions of leadership abound, as a quick dip into the Google pool of famous quotes reveals (Daskal, 2015; Kruse, 2012; Liles, 2021). Field Marshal Montgomery saw leadership as “the capacity and the will to rally men and women to a common purpose and the character which inspires confidence.” Artist Dolly Parton offered that “if your actions create a legacy that inspires others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, then, you are an excellent leader.” Coach Bill Bradley found leadership in “unlocking people's potential to become better.” Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern explained that “leadership is not about necessarily being the loudest in the room, but instead being the bridge, or the thing that is missing in the discussion and trying to build a consensus from there” (Ensor, 2019). Author Ken Kesey determined that “you don't lead by pointing and telling people some place to go. You lead by going to that place and making a case.”

So, what does that mean in education? Definitions of teacher leader-

ship rest in teachers’ “empowerment and agency” (Muijs & Harris, 2005, p. 439) to impact students, schools, and communities, as well as their ability to develop the skills and responsibility needed to improve the contexts in which they work (Perrillo, 2010). Teacher leadership, then, is defined as both a matter of practice, focused on actions and activities, and of identity, focused on social roles and self-image (Sinha & Hanuscin, 2017). For teacher educators, this means working with preservice teachers to address leadership as actions, skills, and dispositions “inherent to their role as teachers and professionals” (Forster, 1997, p. 88) that rest in the development of identity, agency, and expertise (Forde & Dickson, 2017).

All of that makes sense. I understand definitions, I revel in quotations, and I am here for enactments. But—and there’s always a but—I still struggle with this whole leadership thing, especially as it manifests in our current educational environments. How can teachers be empowered and agentic if they have little autonomy over their own curriculum? How can teacher educators inspire their students if they accept inequity and injustice in the schools? Even with the right dispositions, the right skills, the right goals, how can educators at any level lead if their instructional practice and professional identity are constantly, and publicly, denigrated and devalued? When did leadership in education default to those with the smoothest smiles and the politic responses and the right connections instead of those who know what they’re doing, who are doing it for the right reasons?²

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Recently, my dean passed along a book about leadership that contends “people follow leaders with high commitment only when the leader is profoundly trustworthy and when he or she pursues a clear and compelling purpose” (Irwin, 2014, p. 5). That has a nice ring to it, as do so many of those pithy quotes about leadership found on the interwebs, but—and there’s always a but—I still have questions. As well as trust issues.

We call people leaders because of their positions, their titles, their (often self-proclaimed) importance. The president of the United States is referred to as the leader of the free world. I imagine the free world has a thing or two to say about that, given the last four years of orange-hued “leadership” coming out of Washington (not to mention our long-standing leadership of misguided militarism and international interference before that). The director of an organization, the provost of a university, the dean of a college, the chair of a committee: all considered leaders in our daily

parlance. How can someone be considered a leader if they aren't someone worth following? What if those leaders aren't rallying the troops or unlocking potential or making a case for where to go? What if those of us being led have a clear idea of where they can go and no power to actually send them there?

Some people may say I have issues with authority. Those people are not wrong, but hear me out. Our past experiences inform our current responses—since we develop the practical theory that guides our actions by making sense of what we know, do, and value (Handal & Lauvas, 1987)—and I have had quite a few experiences. A principal who scolded me for letting

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students sleep in class, ignoring that my students had completed their work and were exhausted from working after-school jobs. A department head who refused to support my grant application, citing the concern that other faculty would be inconvenienced if it were awarded. A university president who informed me that the humanities and social sciences were best suited to support STEM students' well-rounded education. A director who presented themselves as supportive of my organization while dismissing concerns from that organization. A dean who berated me during a faculty meeting before asserting that I was only one person and they didn't answer to me.

I'd so much prefer a world in which leaders deserved to hold that title by dint of their guidance and conduct rather than their grasp on the talking stick. Because I can't quite fall in line with leadership that leads nowhere. People aren't leaders because of the title appended to their name; people are leaders because we recognize and trust the abilities, intentions, responses, and beliefs corroborating their actions.

All of this thinking brings me back to leadership in the context of teacher education. As teacher educators, we aren't leaders because we stand at the front of the classroom or add publications to our CVs or increase our audience on Twitter. As teacher educators, we lead because we guide thinking, direct development, enact change, ask questions, support progress. Likewise, teachers aren't leaders because they graduate from our programs or pass a few Praxis tests or serve as department heads. They lead because they advocate for students' learning and development (Bradley-Levine, 2018; Noland & Richards, 2015), participate in the learning community of the school (Danielson, 2006; Lambert, 2003), and focus "on what works well, brings vitality, and encourages strengths and human capacities for wellbeing such as compassion, kindness, caring, among many others" (Cherkowski, 2018, p. 72).

Leadership isn't determined by appellation or degree but by action and outcome. Leadership is not blindly following the person in charge but charging that person with making decisions clear. Leadership is not accepting something at face value but valuing the exploration needed to understand what's below the surface. Leadership is focusing on others: what they say, what they do, what they need. And in the end, leadership is the acknowledgment that no one is an island; leaders are a piece of the collective, a part of the main, because they are involved in the same endeavors as those they hope to lead.⁵

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None of the articles in this issue expressly address leadership, yet the authors are leading us all the same: to think, to question, to act. **James Joshua Coleman's** examination of affective reader response is guided by an interrogation of literacy normativities, directing us to consider how "English teacher educators, ELA teachers, and teacher candidates can repair the harm enacted by the field's colonialist, white supremacist, queerphobic, cisnormative, and ableist origins" (p. 273) through new ways of reading and responding to literature. **Ewa McGrail, Kristen Hawley Turner, Amy Piotrowski, Kathryn Caprino, Lauren Zucker, and Mary Ellen Greenwood** present a framework by which to create and assess digital multimodal compositions. In doing so, they charge us with questioning how audience, mode and meaning, and originality are altered in a digital environment and, more importantly, how the power dynamics of assessment in the classroom are changed when we change our understandings of student writing. **Khadeidra Billingsley, Brandie L. Bohney, and Al R. Schleicher** lead us in a different direction by exploring a range of recently published books. Their reviews address issues of project-based learning, linguistic justice, and disciplinary literacy, advocating for our consideration and supporting our implementation of the authors' ideas.

The issue also includes a list of the reviewers who have collectively supported the journal over the last year. My gratitude for their willingness to volunteer their expertise and their time to *English Education*—in the midst of a pandemic, no less—knows no bounds. Every reviewer is indeed a part of this journalistic continent, and their leadership ensures that the bells are tolling in celebration.

Notes

1. My proverbial hat is doffed to Nebraska for coining the perfect state motto.
2. Yes, those are rhetorical questions. I'm familiar with the educational history and the cultural politics that got us where we are today. And yes, "right" may be a matter of opinion, but some things—teacher agency and student empowerment come to mind—are always right. Fight me.
3. John Donne's "Meditation XVII"—one of my favorite poems—was written while he was dean of St Paul's Cathedral in London. Fitting, really, since St Paul's is one of my favorite places to pause and contemplate life. I miss traveling.

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