Tomorrow’s Teacher Leaders: Nurturing a Disposition of Leadership

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Until recently, the terms teacher and leadership were not often mentioned in the same sentence. Educational leadership was synonymous with school administration, and teachers viewed themselves as followers rather than leaders. Over the past fifteen years, this perception has changed. Due to federal mandates such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Response to Intervention (RtI), teacher roles and responsibilities have expanded (Le Cornu, 1999) and distributed school leadership has become the norm (Danielson, 2006; Harrison & Killion, 2007).

Danielson (2006) defines teacher leaders as those who exert positive influence beyond their own classrooms to improve school practices and enhance student learning. Teacher leaders are essential to the success of today’s schools, yet 33-50% of all teachers leave the profession within the first five years (Labone, 1994; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004). As a result, many schools lack the teacher leadership they so desperately need.

To develop today’s teachers into tomorrow’s teacher leaders, school personnel must nurture a disposition of leadership. Teachers with a disposition of leadership exhibit positive self-esteem, feelings of significance, competence, and power, and high self-efficacy. Together, these qualities create a foundation of confidence, motivation, and perseverance necessary for teachers to effectively lead in today’s schools. School environments that nurture a disposition of leadership establish a foundation where both today’s teachers and tomorrow’s teacher leaders can flourish – and so will their students. A clearer understanding of the disposition of leadership qualities is merited.

Positive Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is defined as a person’s perception of overall self worth (Arnett, 2007; Coopersmith, 1967; Huitt, 2004). Noddings has stated, “Possibly the most important single factor in the development of a healthy personality is self-esteem” (2003, p.182). A person’s stable, enduring sense of self worth over time is called baseline self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1986). Regardless of the amount of success or failure experienced, people with high baseline self-esteem tend to evaluate themselves positively overall, while people with low baseline self-esteem tend to be self-critical. Baseline self-esteem can be modified for better or worse, but it is a process that occurs gradually, over time.

American society places great value on high self-esteem (Arnett, 2007). As a result, a person’s baseline self-esteem becomes well established during childhood. High, or positive, self-esteem in children is most likely to result from an authoritative parenting style, characterized by high standards for behavior, firm control, encouragement of independence, and parents’ willingness to reason with their children (Arnett, 2007; Baumrind, 1971; Coopersmith, 1967). Additionally, positive self-esteem in children is nurtured by parental acceptance, interest, and respect for individuality (Coopersmith, 1967). During childhood and through adolescence, approval from parents and other important adults – especially teachers – further contributes to positive self-esteem (Hill & Holmbeck, 1986).

Although baseline self-esteem often drops during the awkward years of adolescence, it usually
increases again in early adulthood. This is due to positive changes in physical appearance, improved relationships with parents, and greater control over social contexts such as school and work (Arnett, 2007; Steinberg, 2008).

**Building Positive Self-Esteem in Teachers**

Positive self-esteem is imperative for teacher leaders in today’s schools. Due to the rapid rate of change in our educational system over the past 15 years, the expanding role of teachers requires more emotional and physical energy than ever before. High stakes testing and sanctions linked to adequate yearly progress (AYP) cause tremendous stress, and increasing public disparagement against teachers, schools, and state educational systems causes teachers to feel discouraged and unworthy (Le Cornu, 1999).

Teachers with low baseline self-esteem are more likely to suffer burnout and leave the profession (Labone, 1994). Burnout occurs when requirements or expectations surpass what an individual can do. When teachers lose faith in their abilities, it leads to high teacher turnover – or even worse – dissatisfied teachers who create unhappy classroom environments for their students (Danielson, 2006; Le Cornu, 1999).

Teachers with positive self-esteem are more likely to reflect on and seek to improve their teaching practices as well as maintain interpersonal skills that are conducive to student learning (Le Cornu, 1999). Following are a few things teacher leaders can do to enhance their self-esteem:

1. **Engage in positive self-talk.** Identify one or two positive traits and repeatedly voice them as affirmations. For example, if a teacher considers himself compassionate, he might recall instances in which he demonstrated this quality while stating, “I am compassionate.” If a teacher believes herself to be a strong leader in the classroom, she might picture recent examples of leadership in her mind while saying, “I am a strong leader in my classroom.”

2. **Give compliments to others.** It only takes a few seconds to genuinely compliment a student, a colleague, or a total stranger; and it almost always results in making the other person feel valued. Ironically, the gift is in the giving. Offering sincere compliments will brighten the moment for both the giver and the receiver.

3. **Develop a social network.** Include individuals within and outside the field of education. Whether on the phone, during lunch, while traveling, or following a meeting, discussing both frustrations and successes with friends and colleagues is an excellent way to decompress and maintain an optimistic attitude. Surrounded with support, the responsibilities and obstacles of teaching are less likely to feel so overwhelming.

Although self-esteem can be altered in adulthood through actions such as those described here, it is usually established during childhood through parental influence and interactions. Self-esteem can be further deconstructed into feelings of significance, competence, and power (Coopersmith, 1967).

**Feelings of Significance, Competence, and Power**

When children spend quality time with their parents or other important adults, they feel valued. The attention, interest, and concern of influential adults communicates to children that they are cared for and
loved. As a result, they experience feelings of personal significance.

Similarly, children with positive self-esteem develop feelings of competence when they discover that they can perform a socially valued task as well or better than others of the same age. These children understand their strengths and limitations, which enables them to set realistic goals and feel confident in pursuing them. Feelings of competence are directly related to self-efficacy.

Through opportunities for self-expression, such as stating their point of view or choosing the clothes they will wear, children with positive self-esteem develop feelings of power and control over their own lives (Coopersmith, 1967; Harter, 1998). As mentioned earlier, limits set by authoritative parents allow children to feel safe expressing their individuality as they make their own decisions within established boundaries. In other words, self-expression within clear limits builds self-confidence.

Nurturing Teachers’ Feelings of Significance, Competence, and Power

Feelings of significance, competence, and power are necessary for children to develop positive self-esteem in childhood. These qualities must also be present for teacher leaders to flourish in today’s schools. First and foremost, teachers need to feel accepted by their students, their colleagues, and their supervisors. Teachers involved in mutually caring relationships with others in the school environment perceive higher levels of support which increases feelings of personal significance. Feelings of significance lead teachers to regard themselves more favorably, which in turn enhances their self-esteem. The opposite is also true. Teachers whose opinions and concerns are dismissed as unimportant cause them to feel unaccepted. Such unsupportive interactions reinforce a negative self-image which results in low baseline self-esteem and feelings of insignificance – currently a leading cause of teacher attrition (Huitt, 2004).

Moreover, when teachers understand the parameters of their authority within the school environment, it frees them to be creative and spontaneous in their work, comfortable to try new things, and motivated to pursue professional goals. Engaging professionally and productively boosts self-esteem, and the sense of accomplishment that results increases feelings of competence. But when double standards or politically motivated agendas exist, rules and expectations become unpredictable, teachers become afraid to take risks, and feelings of competence plummet.

Positive self-esteem is also bolstered when teachers’ individuality and self-expression are honored. Members of a caring faculty may not always agree, yet they are willing to engage in respectful dialogue and consider various points of view without judgment. Teachers in a school environment that allows self-expression feel in control; they are comfortable voicing their opinions and participating in decision-making. Consequently, teacher self-esteem thrives because teachers have confidence that they will be treated with respect and justice, even when things get tense. In a school environment where teachers are told what to do, have little control over day-to-day decisions, or are punished by others when they veer from the unwritten behavioral code, individuality and self-expression are squashed and self-esteem suffers. Teachers in toxic school cultures either sacrifice their mental health to endure the status quo, begin the uphill battle of trying to change the system, or simply leave (Danielson, 2006).

Teacher leaders with feelings of significance, competence, and power are more likely to have high expectations of themselves as models, which in turn supports the high expectations they have for their students (Whitaker, 2004). In support of such development are actions building principals and school
leadership teams can take to create a caring and supportive school environment that nurtures teacher leadership:

1. **Advocate for instructional resources.** Find out what teachers need and make it readily available for them. When teachers know that their requests for resources such as curriculum materials, technology, and classroom supplies will be met, they will be more successful in completing required tasks and more motivated to try new things.

2. **Encourage collaboration.** Provide teachers with time during the school day to plan and problem solve in collaboration with others. Create an environment where teachers feel supported by one another yet free to express themselves as individuals.

3. **Support teachers learning new strategies.** Whether through professional development, peer observation, or teacher evaluation, help teachers see the value in connecting new pedagogical and content knowledge to their current teaching responsibilities. When teachers learn to engage students in learning using research-based practices, everyone wins.

### High Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy, a person’s beliefs about his/her capability to perform a given task, is built on positive self-esteem and feelings of significance, competence, and power (Bandura, 1994; Coopersmith, 1967; Steinberg, 2008). Beginning in childhood and continuing throughout the life span, self-efficacy beliefs strongly influence a person’s feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. People with high self-efficacy set ambitious goals for themselves and approach difficult tasks with confidence. Once committed to a task, they persevere and quickly recover from setbacks. When they fail, they attribute their failure to factors that can be remediated, such as lack of effort or insufficient knowledge. Highly efficacious people possess a strong record of accomplishment and a positive sense of well-being.

People with low self-efficacy lack confidence. They have low aspirations and tend to avoid difficult tasks. When they engage in challenging projects, they often dwell on personal deficiencies, obstacles, and negative outcomes rather than concentrating on how to perform successfully. As a result, they give up easily and are slow to recover from setbacks. People with low self-efficacy are more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression (Bandura, 1994; Steinberg, 2008).

Self-efficacy is important because a person’s success – or lack of – is only partly dependent on actual knowledge and skill. More influential are a person’s self-beliefs in regard to capability (Bandura, 1994; Pajares, 2002; Steinberg, 2008). In other words, self-efficacy is very closely related to self-fulfilling prophecy. A person is likely to achieve as much as he/she believes he/she can. It is also important to note that self-efficacy varies depending on the specific task at hand (Bandura, 1994; Pajares, 2002; Steinberg, 2008). For example, a person can have high social self-efficacy but low academic self-efficacy. Or, a person can have high self-efficacy in math but low self-efficacy in English.

Further, how a person interprets the results of an outcome depends on previously-established self-efficacy beliefs and influences future self-efficacy beliefs. For instance, an “A” student who gets a B on a test is likely to be disappointed and may be apprehensive about future tests. On the other hand, a “C” student who gets a B on the same test is likely to be pleasantly surprised and may even feel encouraged about the chances of doing well on future tests (Pajares, 2002).
Self-efficacy occurs when a person uses self-reflection and self-monitoring to make sense of an experience, explores their thoughts and beliefs about it, evaluates their actions and the outcomes that result, and modifies their thinking and behavior accordingly so that they are likely to experience greater success on their next attempt (Pajares, 2002). The more opportunities both children and adults have to engage in this reflective process, the more self-efficacious they will become.

Promoting High Self-efficacy in Teachers

In childhood and adulthood, the more opportunity a person has to face difficult situations successfully, the stronger his/her self-efficacy becomes. Therefore, the best way to build self-efficacy in teachers is through mastery experiences. In order to teach perseverance, these experiences must be challenging. However, they must not be too challenging. Failure experiences will quickly undermine self-efficacy, especially if they occur before a strong sense of efficacy is established (Bandura, 1994; Pajares, 2002; Steinberg, 2008).

Self-efficacy also can be built through vicarious experiences. For example, seeing a teacher similar to oneself succeed through sustained effort increases the observer’s belief that he/she could also succeed in a similar situation (Pajares, 2002). On the other hand, seeing a teacher fail despite sustained effort can rattle the observer’s sense of self-efficacy. Therefore, observing a teacher role model “bounce back” from failure is an important aspect of building self-efficacy in teachers through vicarious experiences (Bandura, 1994).

Social persuasion is a third means of building self-efficacy in teachers. For example, verbal encouragement that persuades a teacher to accept a challenging task fosters development of skills and strategies, which leads to increased self-efficacy. In contrast, cautionary statements and discouraging words can quickly undermine self-efficacy. If a teacher decides to avoid a task, new skills cannot be developed and future challenges are less likely to be accepted. The resulting lack of mastery experiences will cause self-efficacy to diminish (Bandura, 1994; Steinberg, 2008).

Teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to set ambitious goals, approach difficult tasks with confidence, persevere in the face of difficulty, and quickly recover from setbacks (Bandura, 1994; Pajares, 2002; Steinberg, 2008). These qualities are nurtured in a school environment where teachers are expected to try new skills while provided with appropriate feedback and encouragement (Armstrong, 2006; O’Shea, 2005; Whitaker, 2004). Following are actions building principals and school leadership teams can take to develop teacher leaders by building self-efficacy:

1. Pair high expectations with appropriate levels of support. In order to achieve their potential, teachers must be held to a high standard. However, to reduce feelings of fear, they must feel that support is readily available if needed. One way to accomplish this is to design collaborative tasks for which a variety of resources are available. Resources may include professional development, a structured or guided process, frequent checkpoints or question/answer sessions, or a model/description of the finished product. By pairing high expectations with support, teachers will feel safe during the process and be better prepared to achieve success.

2. Provide opportunities for teachers to observe each other engaging in difficult tasks. Whether through classroom observations, participation in faculty discussions, or engagement in committee work, teachers can benefit from the positive role modeling of others. Both day-to-day responsibilities
and special events provide opportunities for the building principal and teacher leaders to model professionalism which encourages confidence, motivation, and perseverance in others.

3. **Celebrate teachers’ strengths while continuing to encourage progress toward improvement of weaknesses.** In order to build perseverance, teachers need encouragement as they work to complete difficult tasks along with positive reinforcement upon completion. Even when successes are small, they must be recognized. In the event of failure, teachers’ efforts must be acknowledged before a gentle analysis of weaknesses is conducted. When teachers understand that they will not be minimized or ridiculed for their weaknesses, they will be more likely to work toward improvement.

### Empowering Students

Nurturing a disposition of leadership is crucial in today’s schools. When teachers enjoy positive self-esteem, feel significant, competent, and powerful, and demonstrate high self-efficacy, their students become empowered. In other words, teachers who consistently model a disposition of leadership influence the development of self-efficacy in their students (Bandura, 1994; Robinson, 1994; Siitonen & Robinson, 1998; Helm, 2007). Teacher leaders can empower their students through the following actions (Patterson, 2007):

1. **Give purposeful, earned praise.** In order to maximize the effects of praise, teachers should provide specific details about what a student accomplished. For example, “You did a great job introducing your group during yesterday’s presentations” is better than, “Nice job yesterday!” However, one should not underestimate the value of more casual, positive adult affirmations. Personalizing interactions by referring to a student by name and providing compliments such as, “I like your shirt!” or “That’s a nice looking pair of shoes!” can also assist in enhancing a student’s self-image.

2. **Reframe students’ self-image.** Students who feel negatively about themselves will often benefit greatly from daily positive affirmations provided from an adult. For students who need a great deal of empowerment, select a trait or skill that they already possess, such as a strong work ethic or a warm personality, and provide them with positive comments about it. For example, “You really worked hard on your math assignment last night. I’m proud of you!” Over time, students who regularly receive positive affirmations are more likely to repeat the constructive behavior and – more importantly – they are more likely to internalize the positive affirmations.

3. **Utilize a team approach.** When only one adult in a student’s life is giving positive affirmations, some students will not take them seriously. But if the student hears positive feedback from various sources, the words will begin to have a positive effect. For students most in need of empowerment, work collaboratively with key adults in their life, such as teachers and coaches. Together, make a concerted effort to point out what they are doing right or doing well. Over time, even the most hard-to-reach students will begin to internalize the positive affirmations when they are stated by numerous, significant adults in their lives.

Once students are empowered, increased academic achievement is likely (Kohn, 1991; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Garcia, 1999; Corbett & Wilson, 2002).

### Conclusion
To develop today’s teachers into tomorrow’s teacher leaders, school personnel must nurture a disposition of leadership. Teachers with a disposition of leadership exhibit positive self-esteem, feelings of significance, competence, and power, and high self-efficacy. Together, these qualities create a foundation of confidence, motivation, and perseverance necessary for teachers to effectively lead in today’s schools.

Empowering teachers to develop a disposition of leadership requires a concerted effort, as well as courage to do the “right” thing in spite of oppositional pressures. While the task is not an easy one, it is well worth our time and energy. School environments that nurture a disposition of leadership establish a foundation where both today’s teachers and tomorrow’s teacher leaders can flourish – and so will their students.

References


Suggested Resources

http://www.makeadifference.com/

Mary Robinson Reynolds holds an M.S. in Educational Psychology, Counseling and Development. Her website offers a variety of inspirational resources for business and education to support making a positive difference in the lives of others.

http://www.gatesfoundation.org/

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation supports a variety of projects including several that are directly linked to education. The Foundation provides funding through grants and scholarships to support progress at all education levels, early childhood to postsecondary education.

http://www.responsiveclassroom.org/

The Responsive Classroom is an approach to elementary teaching that emphasizes social, emotional, and academic growth in a strong and safe school community. The goal is to enable optimal student learning. Created by classroom teachers and backed by evidence from independent research, the Responsive Classroom approach is based on the premise that children learn best when they have both academic and social-emotional skills. The approach therefore consists of classroom and school wide practices for deliberately helping children build academic and social-emotional competencies.

http://www.selfesteem.org/

The La Belle Foundation established this website to facilitate and implement the raising of individual self-esteem. This free resource provides useful information and curriculum for teaching one how to meet life’s challenges and raise self-esteem.

http://www.edutopia.org/

The vision of the George Lucas Foundation is of a new world of learning where kids and parents, teachers and administrators, policy makers and the people they serve, all are empowered to change education for the better. Edutopia provides a vision for this new world of learning as well as leading-edge interactive tools and resources to help make it a reality. The George Lucas Foundation documents classrooms where instructional innovations are taking place. Inspiring teachers and students are spotlighted with the hope that others will consider how their work can promote change in their own schools.