

# Teachers as Literacy Leaders

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**W**hen we agreed to share our thinking about literacy leaders in American education, we feared that it would be a daunting task to merge the ideas of three different teacher educators. Instead, we found immediately that we share the same philosophy about the very nature of literacy leadership. We enthusiastically admire the willingness of literacy specialists and supervisors, coaches, professors, and researchers to go the extra mile and acquire broad expertise in the field. But we need to reiterate and emphasize the truth that these experts have already embraced. Simply put, we need *teachers* to serve as literacy leaders in every classroom in the United States if we want to establish reading as the key that unlocks a world of equal opportunity and personal fulfillment for every child.

So how do we populate the world's classrooms with caring and competent literacy leaders? As teacher educators, we decided to focus on the qualities that we believe are critical for literacy leadership, particularly for teachers who are striving to become literacy leaders within their own classrooms and schools. We need to emphasize that these are not qualifications that require esoteric study or additional certifications; these are qualities within the grasp of every thoughtful, conscientious, and reflective teacher.

## A Profound Love and Respect for the Printed Word

Ruddell (1995) sought to identify the qualities of influential teachers, those educators who made a profound and long-lasting impression on their students. One quality that stood out from all the others for us was a love of reading, an approach to literature that

Rosenblatt (1978) referred to as an “aesthetic stance.” Influential teachers are not content to simply read; they identify with characters, walk in their shoes, laugh and cry with them, and experience the sheer, unabashed joy of reading.

We would be naive to suggest that all teachers have that love of reading. What has been coined the Peter Effect is alive and well among preservice as well as inservice teachers (Applegate & Applegate, 2004; Nathanson, Pruslow, & Levitt, 2008). The Peter Effect is nothing other than the dilemma of demanding that teachers give to their students a love of reading that they do not have themselves.

But for teachers whose love for reading has not yet been ignited, all is not lost. Literacy leaders recognize that they live in a world surrounded by books and by avid readers, if not in their own school, then in their district or in the professional organizations that serve educational communities all over the world. Literacy leaders actively seek out those colleagues who love to read, let themselves catch that enthusiasm, immerse themselves in the experience of reading, and allow their lives (and the lives of their students) to be transformed by the texts that they read.

## Personal Professional Excellence

Few educational developments have rankled teachers as much as scripted literacy programs, particularly when those programs are implemented with a rigidity that deprives them of opportune teachable moments. Perhaps most difficult for literacy leaders is the realization that scripted programs are popular with well-intentioned educators and legislators

because they are assumed to function effectively without regard to the level of professional competence of the teacher. However, the recent broad-based appraisal of Reading First programs (Gamse, Jacob, Horst, Boulay, & Unlu, 2008) called that assumption into serious question. The study suggested instead that the scripted programs favored by Reading First officials were largely ineffectual because the children in the programs made no growth in comprehension, the very *raison d'être* of reading.

That finding is intensely alarming for teachers of urban youth, particularly in those schools that serve disadvantaged and traditionally underserved children—the very children that Reading First was designed to help. But it can also serve as a clarion call for teachers to step forward and assert their leadership by virtue of their sheer competence and skill as literacy leaders. Opportunities for professional growth still abound in our educational system. The literacy leader takes advantage of any and all chances for professional development and evolves into a diligent, lifelong learner of the craft of teaching. The literacy leader associates with growth-oriented colleagues, forming collegial groups that serve as sources of information, encouragement, and further professional development.

When literacy leaders find themselves in a situation where they are expected to follow programs built on dubious assumptions or questionable assessments, they realize there is no need to undermine district expectations. Instead, literacy leaders take direct advantage of teachable moments, confident in their firm grasp of the common underlying goals of all literacy instruction. Literacy leaders understand that by demonstrating the progress that their students have made toward the attainment of those goals, they will enhance their reputation for competence and will, in turn, be afforded even more freedom as a professional. Without a doubt, literacy leaders know that the road to freedom in the classroom is professional competence, earned through diligent pursuit of professional growth.

## Classrooms Conducive to Reader Engagement

A recent and well-publicized report published by the National Endowment for the Arts (2007) painted a

rather grim picture of a nation with a dwindling interest in reading. But in studies of classroom interaction in response to reading, the news is equally grim. Allington (2001) stated that in study after study, “researchers report that in the typical classroom the assigned tasks overwhelmingly emphasize copying, remembering, and reciting with few tasks assigned that engage students in thinking about what they’ve read” (p. 94).

The agenda for literacy leaders in these circumstances seems clear. We must create literacy learning activities that are authentic and meaningful for students so that they learn that reading and writing are purposeful for their own lives. In addition, literacy leaders seek to challenge their students to think deeply about what they read, for the depth of their thinking is the pathway to intellectual growth. They teach students to regard stories as slices of life that a writer shares with us, tales that are often interspersed with profound truths that can be unearthed by those willing to think creatively about them. Literacy leaders ensure that all students receive access to informational texts by building their background knowledge and content vocabulary, and by providing tools (e.g., graphic organizers) that will help students acquire new information and understand our world. Importantly, literacy leaders recognize that informational texts are not collections of facts, but the stuff of dreams.

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## Responsive and Rigorous Instruction

Literacy leaders recognize that they cannot simply teach; rather, they thoughtfully *orchestrate* instruction in their classrooms. Duffy and Hoffman (1999) argued that “the best instruction results when combinations of methods are orchestrated by a teacher who decides what to do in light of children’s needs” (p. 11). These teachers assess students to design learning opportunities that match their strengths,

needs, and interests. When working in culturally and linguistically diverse schools, literacy leaders include multicultural literature on the shelves of the classroom library and integrate these materials into read-alouds, Readers Theatre, and other reading activities to help students make relevant connections between the literature and their lives (Turner, 2005).

While responsive instruction is crucial, literacy leaders understand that this does not mean that academic content should be watered down. Instead, responsive instruction is also rigorous, meaning that it provides students with “access to challenging curriculum plus the social and academic support that will enable them to succeed” (Au, 2006, p. 34). Literacy leaders who orchestrate responsive and rigorous instruction optimize students’ opportunities to learn and engage in higher level thinking about texts.

## The Complete Literacy Leader

All in all, we believe that literacy leaders share with their students their own belief that reading is a joyful activity that enriches the lives of all who open themselves to those joys. Literacy leaders develop and follow through on an agenda for personal growth that gains them the respect and freedom that is due to all professionals. Such competence empowers literacy leaders to orchestrate literacy instruction in ways that are both responsive and rigorous. And finally, literacy leaders teach their students that reading is not a series of details to be committed to memory

and forgotten shortly thereafter, but rather that reading has the potential both to change lives in profound ways and to teach us much about the great adventure that is the life we share on this earth. These are the unmistakable marks of the true literacy leader.

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