

Preface

Welcome to a new era of literacy leadership that is a result of a number of recent changes in education and the nation's economy. As you know, from the 1990s to the present day, there has been an upsurge in national and state policies related to literacy instruction, particularly reading instruction. From *No Child Left Behind* to *Race to the Top*, stakes for student performance as measured by test-based accountability have increased. States and school districts have felt the thumb of policy intervention on their backs and have reacted in various ways, from standards adoption to mandated curriculum compliance. Scientific research has become the driver of the reform and accountability movements. To top it off, the nation's economy has been slipping. Funding for education has decreased nationally, both within most states and for a majority of our local school districts. Administrators often have no choice but to cut back positions, services, programs, and materials and equipment.

As a result, the role of literacy leadership has been and is currently in the process of evolving, and in many contexts it is changing rapidly. Districts that used to have a literacy coach in each building—a position that was hailed as a powerful strategy for increasing students' literacy performance in the early 2000s—are now assigning one literacy coach or reading specialist to multiple schools. Job responsibilities are being combined as positions are cut. There is less support for classroom teachers and fewer positions that identify literacy leadership as their primary job description.

However, rather than provide fewer services to children, many educators are stepping up to the plate and taking on literacy-leadership roles themselves. Administrators, classroom teachers, staff, and community members are advocating for students' literacy needs in ways they may never have had to before. Collaboration among colleagues has sprouted to meet needs in a district. Technology has become a tool to disseminate information while saving money. Professional literacy communities are forming to provide support so that no educator or school district has to feel isolated. Educators who are speaking up and taking on these new leadership roles need our support and guidance to become agents of change in these days of education reform. That's what this book is all about.

The Literacy Leadership Handbook: Best Practices for Developing Professional Literacy Communities takes a proactive stance to help school districts' literacy leaders—whomever they may be—not only to see themselves as agents of change and growth, but also to facilitate their growth as professionals who promote growth in themselves, their colleagues, their students, the school culture, and the general profession. Each chapter integrates this theme of growth and development.

Anyone can be a literacy leader if they take it upon themselves to advocate for the development of a school culture that supports the democratic growth of knowledge, skills, and dispositions to escalate and motivate students' literacy learning. This book will help educators reach their goals as literacy advocates and leaders in their districts.

Literacy Leadership as an Art

Lucy Calkins's classic book *The Art of Teaching Writing* (1994) came to mind when we started writing this book. We see literacy leadership the way Calkins sees writing pedagogy—as an artful endeavor. It is philosophical, creative, and reflects an intrinsic and emergent process. Also, we see both writing and leadership as talents that can be cultivated, especially with the help of a good mentor. We know of highly effective, thoughtful literacy leaders. We also know others who try their best but don't possess the underlying artistic talent and the heart needed to feel and to be as effective as they possibly could be in the role. These observations are what lead us to make connections between the qualities and dispositions of an artist and those of a literacy leader.

Readers will notice right away that *The Literacy Leadership Handbook* follows an artistic metaphor. We selected the cover art because the mosaic tree reflects our vision of collaboration and growth among the literacy leaders of a school. Based on our vision of leadership as an artistic endeavor and talent, we have named and outlined each chapter with titles and headings that reflect art terms. We begin each chapter with a quote from an artist and an artistic image and have tied the quotes into the meaning of the chapters' content. We propose that after reading this book, readers will be able to paint a masterpiece of literacy leadership that reflects a democratic experience involving the collaboration of a literacy-learning community.

How to Use This Book

To best meet the needs of educators new to the field of literacy leadership, whether they are in college training programs right now and reading this book for a course or experienced teachers in the field who are taking on new leadership roles, we have chosen to integrate chapters demonstrating an overarching view of literacy leadership spotlighting multiple perspectives and the roles of numerous leaders within a system. Gone are the days when singular individuals—the principal, supervisor, or coach—led literacy learning. We must re-envision a system with literacy leadership valued as a shared and mutually enhancing responsibility—where learning is synergistic throughout the many niches of a school.

We recommend that this book be used within the context of a literacy-learning community so that the role of literacy leadership within a school building or district can be explored and discussed as groups of educators interact with the book. As ideas and issues arise, educators can discuss how their district envisions and negotiates the leadership roles and the literacy program. At the end of each chapter we have included Questions for Reflection and Discussion to spark conversations around the literacy portrait your school hopes to paint and a Practical Applications section that suggests ideas for applying the concepts in each chapter to classroom and professional development activities.

Another feature of this book is the incorporation of voices of practicing literacy leaders who are serving in schools across the nation. Each chapter exhibits features written by experts in the field that connect literacy leadership to the Common Core State Standards and Response to Intervention. In the Critical Voices and the Ethical Literacy Leader features in each chapter, educators speak honestly about personal issues and experiences they have had that relate to the chapter topics. Furthermore, Chapter 3 includes two interviews: the first with Linda Sullivan, elementary educator and literacy leader in Newton, New Jersey; the second with Dana Jackson, secondary educator and high school literacy coach in Franklin, New Jersey. In addition, Chapter 6 includes an interview with the literacy-leadership team at Ridge and Valley Charter School in Blirstown, New Jersey. Our contributors include classroom teachers across grade levels, literacy coaches and reading specialists working in school districts, representatives from outside agencies, teacher educators, administrators, and parents. We have reached out to colleagues from across the country and have represented both urban and rural school districts. See our About the Contributors pages for biographies of each contributor.

Welcome to the World of Literacy Leadership

You truly are one of a rare breed of people. You have chosen to become a school leader, a literacy leader. It is no easy job. It comes with many challenges and sometimes few accolades of recognition outside of knowing deep inside that you want the best for your students, your colleagues, and yourself. We are all learners and need to support and nurture each other.

We hope our book becomes an invaluable tool for you as you develop as a literacy leader. We would love to hear from you. Tell us what you're doing; share your triumphs and challenges. Let us know how we can help further. We don't have all of the answers, but with our combined experience in the field, we have strong networks upon which we can draw.

Be strong in your new role. Your colleagues and students are depending on you!

Cindy Lassonde

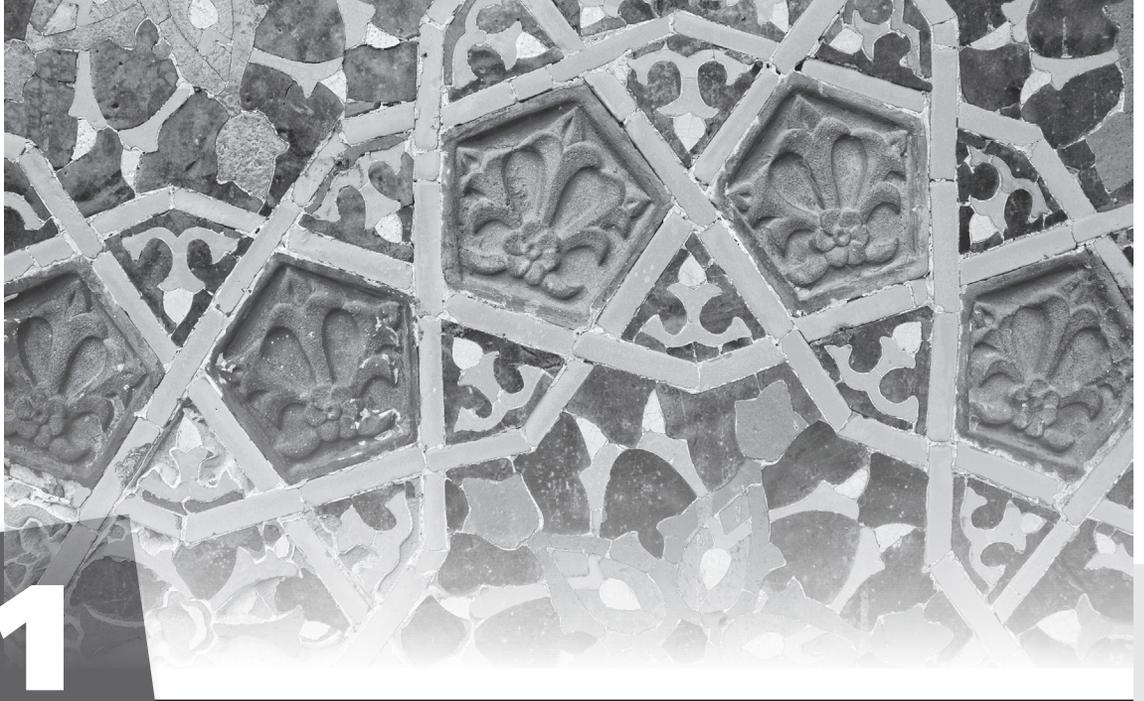
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Reframing the Culture of Literacy Leadership

“The greater danger for most of us lies not in setting our aim too high and falling short; but in setting our aim too low, and achieving our mark.”

—MICHELANGELO

Introduction

We'd like to begin our journey with you, our reader, by sharing the following experience that occurred recently between one of the authors, Kristine, and her nine-year-old son, Mathew. As you read their story, think about how Mathew and Michelangelo—in the chapter-opening quote—may have been inspired by narratives.

Thursday night, snug in bed, my son Mathew and I read the last line of Kate DiCamillo's (2006) book *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*: "Once, oh marvelous once, there was a rabbit who found his way home" (p. 200). Still wrapped within the emotions of the story, I held Mathew close as he cried softly, claiming how this was the saddest book he had ever read. Mathew talked about Edward's journey, commenting on all of the important plot points, how he felt about each, and how he'd like to create an adventure story of his own. All the while, I listened with full intention and presence. I was filled with awe and wonder witnessing my son as emotionally connected, inspired, artistic, empowered, and open to change and transformation.

Pulling back to experience the full wonder of literacy leadership, we can see how Mathew is both a learner and literacy leader. And so is Kristine. Together, they are thriving in an environment where literacy learning and literacy leadership are intimately connected. In this space, learning and leadership are experienced as truly synergistic, moment by moment. Here, learning and leadership are synonymous with developing as an agent of change. Mathew shows us he is learner, leader, and agent of change by actively tapping into his personal preferences and then intentionally choosing to read *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*; by deciding, consciously or not, how to engage with the text, paying close attention to plot and resonating emotionally with the characters; and by planning his own next steps as a reader and writer. We see Mathew learning from the text, leading his own literacy development, and ultimately growing (changing) as a human being. What we may not see, but do instinctively understand and value, is that Mathew is, in fact, changing the whole of his literacy environment and directing the next steps for Kristine as a literacy learner, leader, and agent of change!

What about Kristine? How is she a learner and literacy leader? In this exchange, we saw Kristine learning from Mathew as she focused her attention—watching and listening—to what he could do in this powerful literacy moment. We saw Kristine as a literacy leader in the way she was gently organizing, nurturing, and sustaining the literacy environment. She was also a responsible leader in the way she quietly celebrated Mathew's in-the-moment achievement. What we may not see, but do instinctively understand and value, is that Kristine is also changing the whole of the literacy environment! She is responsible for her own learning so Mathew can grow and achieve. She is accountable as a literacy leader

by creating and re-creating the literacy environment for Mathew to thrive as a human being. She is working as an agent of change. Transformation is always happening here! This is literacy leadership.

The opening quote by Michelangelo inspires us to aim high in our lives! We are encouraged to create a bold mission and vision for education that will challenge us to change, grow, and transform. Within this bold mission and vision, literacy leaders have the potential, when inspired, to create vibrant schools where leaders, educators, and students grow, change, and transform all the time. When we declare that the purpose of education is for personal and social transformation, so too is literacy learning and literacy leadership. And that is what this book is all about! Let's read on to understand why education, literacy leadership, and learning must be transformative, especially within the context of today's educational and political milieu.

Literacy Leadership in Today's Educational and Political Forum

As classroom teachers, coaches, supervisors, and administrators, we are inundated with policies and practices to implement in the name of student achievement, career and college readiness, the market economy, and global competition. While we tend to enjoy linear cause-and-effect relationships, and cause-and-effect problem solving, the issues we face in education today cannot be drilled down to any one factor or central cause to fix. The world is far too complex for any quick fix. Education is far too complex. Schools are far too complex. Life in the classroom is far too complex!

What we can do, though, is set our sight on accepting and valuing the necessity of change in our lives. Change means growth and development. The natural world, humans, and all the other species among us are hard-wired for evolution! We are meant to change, grow, and develop to flourish and thrive within the systems that make up our lives. When we internalize this, we are ready to begin our work as leaders who create and re-create social institutions—schools—that are capable of educating students in ways that truly demonstrate academic excellence, personal growth, and social change. In setting this as our high aim, the next authentic move is to take stock of current reality.

Let's begin taking stock of our current reality in education. We need to consider how current shifts, policies, and practices influence literacy leadership.

- No Child Left Behind has influenced literacy leadership in a number of ways. School districts have restructured literacy leadership roles, placing professional development front and center. The expectations for assessment and accountability have increased for all students, across all schools. Leaders are

pragmatically working together in demanding situations to exchange and supplement knowledge respectfully.

- Race to the Top influences literacy leadership, as it promotes objectives for rewarding teachers, focuses on teacher effectiveness, increases the number of effective leaders and teachers, and defines pathways for school leadership. These shifts spark the need for information and knowledge on topics such as how teachers learn, what teachers need to learn, and how to build capacity and sustainability regarding necessary changes in teacher learning.
- Common Core State Standards influence literacy leadership through new goals and standards regarding student performance and achievement. As a result, literacy leadership shifts to promote responsive changes in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. To further improve schools, literacy leaders will need to focus professional development efforts on learning the new standards and how to implement the standards through curriculum, instruction, and assessment. (See Tracey Johnson's Common Core State Standards Connection: The Call to Common Ground feature in this chapter.)
- Curriculum mapping influences literacy leadership, as it is considered part of the process of gap identification and analysis. Curriculum mapping is an "active" literacy-leadership process as educators work together to weave literacy across the curriculum. Many schools rely on committee work to collaboratively design these frameworks for curriculum mapping and integrating literacy across the content areas.
- Teacher evaluation reform influences literacy leadership in several ways. Literacy leaders inspire teachers to reflect and encourage a culture of ongoing professional development and learning that includes change and growth. Improving the effectiveness of teachers, however, does not necessarily come from the top. It comes from effective teaching and literacy leaders who foster and support it. As teaching performance and student achievement are systematically linked, the goals of teacher evaluation reform should focus on supporting professional learning, identifying teachers who need additional guidance and support—and perhaps a change of career—and recognizing expert teachers who can act as literacy leaders who contribute to the growth of effectiveness of their peers.
- Professional development influences literacy leadership as stakeholders assume responsibility for their own learning and the development of the school as a learning community. All school staff must play a part in improving school-wide professional development. All stakeholders must be involved in the planning, implementation, and assessment of professional learning.
- Student achievement and adequate yearly progress influence literacy leadership because students' literacy needs vary. Therefore, literacy programs must be district-designed to meet individual needs. School-based literacy leaders help immediately assess and address students' unique issues and



The Common Core State Standards Connection

The Call to Common Ground

—TRACEY JOHNSON

Tracey currently works at the New York State Education Department. Her diverse experiences include serving as literacy coordinator at the Capital Region Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), an adjunct professor at Sage Graduate School in Troy, New York, and an ELA Coordinator/Reading First Coach in a charter school.

Have you ever envisioned what learning is like through the lens of a child? What if the child once lived in a different region of the world or came from a different socioeconomic background? Oftentimes, our vision is impaired by our perceptions and biases, resulting from a tendency to focus on our differences; however, there is a need to find common ground.

The Common Core State Standards were developed on the foundation that, regardless of a child's zip code, there is a baseline of academic knowledge and skills that all students need in pursuit of colleges and careers. Forty-five states have adopted the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). The adoption of these standards by the states establishes a call for common ground toward collaboration and

cooperation on matters of public-education policy. These states, faced with student and teacher mobility, have alleviated these perceived barriers by already collaborating on common assessments, and modeling curricular and instructional materials. The Common Core State Standards articulate a move for common ground by emphasizing a shift toward a balance of literature and informational texts, a greater focus on text complexity, emphasis on argument and informative/explanatory writing, writing about sources or using evidence to inform argument, and a focus on formal and informal conversation and academic and domain-specific vocabulary.

The clarion call for common ground has gone out! Literacy leaders across the country (e.g., teachers, content experts, higher education faculty) have an opportunity to contribute to this transformational reform for the benefit of all students.

support teachers as they work collaboratively to provide a broad spectrum of context-specific literacies.

- School, home, and community partnerships are integral to literacy leadership. Partnerships that develop personal relationships among school, home, and community leaders, who are also focused on improving students' learning, strengthen a school district. Literacy leaders can tap into homes and communities not only for valuable resources but to learn more about their students and how they learn. Within partnerships, literacy leaders will find opportunities for literacy to be used as a means of personal transformation and social change.

How are these shifts, policies, and practices influencing literacy leadership in your local context?

Although not easy, it is critical that we spend time within our school contexts in conversation with colleagues to understand how shifts, policies, and practices influence literacy leadership, and how literacy leadership, in turn, influences student learning, school culture, curriculum, assessment, professional development, communication practices, and norms for celebrating success. This kind of work is an entry point into systems thinking: one way of noticing how patterns of behavior influence what is deemed important in schools today. In applying systems thinking, we understand how cause-and-effect chains fail to capture the complexity of life in school. Instead, creating several causal loops or feedback cycles enables us to better understand how systems operate in our educational environments.

When we set our aim high to create schools designed for academic excellence, personal growth, and social transformation, we have identified a desired state: a mission or vision that is compelling, one that we are willing to bring into full life. When we acknowledge our current reality of how things actually are in a school—how shifts, policies, and practices influence literacy leadership—and how literacy leadership influences aspects of schooling that we deem important, we are naming where we are in relation to our stated mission and vision. This gap identification and analysis is where the deepest and perhaps most difficult work of literacy leadership is to be found and actualized—within the gap between vision and reality. But, within this gap, a renaissance can happen!

Creating a Renaissance

The word “renaissance” instantly brings forth images of change, growth, and development! Ravitch (2010) writes that the key to success of human development, and therefore human capital, is education. Whether our current educational system is mediocre or excellent, it will affect our economy and our lives—both civically and culturally—in the near and far future. Therefore, as literacy leaders we are challenged to create a “renaissance in education” (p. 224) that does more than simply exceed notions of a basic skills education. We are called to teach “the best of what has been thought and known and done” (p. 224) across disciplines. (Read how Jennifer Ireland’s team worked toward transforming the culture of literacy leadership in The Ethical Literacy Leader feature at the end of this chapter.)

We agree that education needs a renaissance.

Reframing Literacy Leadership

Although the work to do is vast, literacy leadership is a path of hope, renewal, and promise. In this renaissance, literacy leadership is embodied as community cultural

development, offering a rich canvas of ideology, mission, and vision. It is a framework of possibility and carries an ethos of liberation, transformation, and human and cultural development. It is a cultural container for educational philosophy, inspiration, artistry, and responsive pedagogy that is colorful, vibrant, dynamic, and diverse.

The culture we frame in this book is one that portrays literacy leadership as

- valuing traditional and alternative ways of knowing by blending artistry, intuition, and logic/reasoning;
- life-enhancing, purposeful, and authentic;
- democratic, antioppressive, and transformative, wherein all stakeholders' voices are valued and nurtured as learners and leaders; furthermore, multiple perspectives and diversity are sought, valued, and integral to growth and development;
- dialogic—privileging conversation as the catalyst for consciousness raising, personal transformation, and large-scale change; and
- integral to place- and community-based education, whereby teachers and students work and learn together as coinvestigators of relevant issues and concerns (Smith & Sobel, 2010).

Evolving Roles and Approaches

In this new renaissance of literacy leadership, what is needed most of all is a flattening of the hierarchy whereby all stakeholders embrace community-based learning. Although traditional roles may still exist, the difference lies in the way learning, leadership, communication, and knowledge are dispersed within the environment. Instead of *roles* coming together, *humans* come together to learn, dialogue, and create solutions within the context of literacy-leadership work. (Read Virginia Goatley's *Critical Voices* feature at the end of this chapter, in which she talks about the complexities of the evolving face of literacy leadership.)

We need to recognize the power and beauty of all stakeholders sharing in the leadership work of a literacy-learning community: students, community members, teachers, curriculum specialists, supervisors, department heads, vice-principals, principals, the superintendent, and members of the board of education. Transforming the toxic “us-against-them” mental model, this literacy-leadership renaissance is one of open dialogue and collaborative learning. Literacy leaders realize the power of blending individual, school, and community goals and objectives. Personal transformation is not lost to school and organizational transformation. Within this collaborative framework, literacy leaders

- engage in deep, continuous learning;
- contribute to ongoing, proactive, critical, and collaborative dialogue;

- participate in the development of curriculum, instruction, and assessment;
- create dynamic learning environments honoring the natural rhythm of learning, reflection, and renewal;
- apply appreciative leadership and coaching strategies to nurture and sustain growth, change, and development;
- collaboratively assess literacy learning and the literacy-leadership work; and
- celebrate success.

Individual Approach to Literacy Leadership

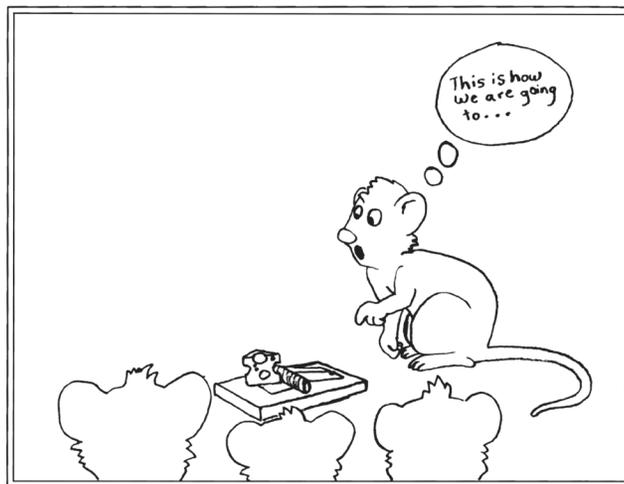
In some contexts, literacy leadership equates to what we call Lone-Ranger leadership, whereby one person is singularly responsible for championing academic achievement, designing and implementing professional development, furthering the literacy education agenda, and perhaps even whole-school reform. This role may be reserved for the principal or vice-principal, the literacy coach or reading specialist, or the curriculum coordinator or department supervisor. This paradigm often results in ineffective change due to an overemphasis on top-down management; micromanagement; loose, bottom-up, unfocused grassroots initiatives; or no real sign of leadership at all (Fullan, 2008). In addition, this model often privileges and perpetuates a dogmatic perspective on literacy education and leadership—one singular perspective, focus, and pedagogy.

Solo expeditions into literacy leadership are unsustainable for the individual charged with this responsibility and also unsustainable for the school as an organization. We can learn about effective leadership skills by looking to disciplines outside of education. For example, in *The Six Secrets of Change: What the Best Leaders Do to Help Their Organizations Survive and Thrive*, Michael Fullan writes, “A key reason why organizations do not sustain learning is that they focus on *individual* leaders. As individual leaders come and go, the company engages in episodic ups (if they are lucky) and downs” (Fullan, 2008, p. 107). The net effect is brain drain. When a talented, dynamic leader leaves, the acquired knowledge and change may leave, too. In this individual-as-leader approach, capacity is not built. Thus, for literacy leadership and change to stick, leadership must be distributed across a “flattened” system as shown in Figure 1.1. In this way, capacity is built through the diffusion of leadership, knowledge consumption and production, and even ownership-of-change processes.

Team Approach to Literacy Leadership

When literacy leadership is positioned and understood as a shared endeavor, possibilities open for a shift in school culture to take place. (Refer to this chapter’s Response to Intervention [RTI] and the Literacy Leader feature to see what Dawn Hamlin suggests about working as a team to successfully implement RTI.) Literacy leadership needs to be cultivated throughout the entire school as a system

FIGURE 1.1 (A) Individual Lone-Ranger Leadership; (B) A Flattened System of Diffused Leadership



(A)



(B)

(Fullan, 2008). Literacy leaders work collaboratively to determine learning needs, allocate resources, experiment with pedagogical practices, plan and implement professional learning, reflect, conduct research, and so much more!

In addition, depending on the context, literacy leaders may find themselves working in a variety of capacities. Care should be taken as literacy leaders develop their talent and skill as consultants, coaches, mentors, facilitators, and supervisors. Literacy leaders will wear many hats, but first and foremost, literacy leaders

are learners too. Collaboratively, literacy leaders can design their own learning journeys. This team approach to literacy leadership truly honors the growth and development of people, schools, and communities.



Response to Intervention (RTI) and the Literacy Leader

It Definitely Takes a Team!

—DAWN HAMLIN

Dawn is a former special education teacher who taught in both traditional public schools and residential facilities. Currently, she is assistant professor in the educational psychology department at SUNY College at Oneonta.

To achieve great success, implementing RTI takes a well-run team, on which the literacy leader plays an integral role. This team should include the reading specialist or literacy coach, the special education and general education teachers, paraprofessionals, families, and, of course, the students themselves. This team may also include administrators. While many administrators in many districts may not typically be involved in the day-to-day implementation of RTI, other districts have very connected and active leadership steering the processes.

Successful interventions, data collection, and program planning cannot and should not be handled alone. To effectively implement RTI, literacy leaders, special educators, and paraprofessionals will have to identify key components of the process, such as who is responsible for certain steps, how roles will be assigned, and how reviews will be done. All stakeholders must be very careful to keep the focus on obtaining *relevant, meaningful* data that can be used to improve instruction and provide targeted interventions (Bushell & Baer, 1994; Heward, 2003). All of this takes a great deal of planning. Questions that need to be addressed by the team are the following:

1. What types of assessments will be used? What are the critical skills expected at this level? Do the assessments reflect those skills? How frequently will skills be measured? If curriculum-based measurement (CBM) is used, who will develop the CBM probes?
2. Who will be responsible for actually assessing the students? Can one team member do weekly CBMs while another team member is responsible for daily probes if delicate data are needed for instructional decision making?
3. What role can the student play in the data collection process? Many students are fascinated by data charts and often they are able to graph their own data. (Of course, student-graphed data should be compared to teacher data for reliability, but this is a wonderful skill that can potentially generalize to different settings.)
4. How will data be reviewed? How will instructional or intervention decisions be made? Who will review interventions for procedural fidelity and research supporting its use? Who will score the CBM materials and other assessment materials? Who will conduct item analyses so the team can deliver fine-tuned instruction?

Read Jennifer Ireland's *The Ethical Literacy Leader* feature at the end of this chapter for an example of how a team can effectively work together to reach common goals as it upholds its principles and values. You will see how all stakeholders benefit as ethical generative learning communities are created.

Team approaches to literacy leadership need to be envisioned as thriving, vibrant, and creative networks. Many leaders within an organization are responsible for literacy learning and therefore literacy leadership. In what ways might this network work as a lever for transformation?

Literacy Communities as Levers for Change

Within our reframed literacy learning community, we must question the way we think, learn, and work if we are to truly generate a “life-affirming system” (Marshall, 2006, p. xvi) that liberates the “goodness and genius of all children” (p. xvi). Reflect on how you would answer these questions about your school's system:

- Does the current design of our system unleash the goodness and genius of children and adults in this system—our literacy leaders?
- Does the current design invite and nurture the power and creative use of literacy learning as a means of obtaining high academic achievement?
- Are we privileging literacy as just the ability to read, write, and pass tests while marginalizing the way literacy can be used by children and adults to creatively transform relationships, build community, and work for social change?

These questions spark the beginning of a much deeper dialogue that is waiting to happen in education and our schools. Wheatley (2002) reminds us that “Large and successful change efforts start with conversations among friends” (p. 25). Transformation begins when way deep inside a system a handful of colleagues decide they cannot tolerate something anymore and want to work toward an ambitious dream.

When we initiate the kind of conversation in which we inquire into a topic, an idea, an issue, or a concern that we care deeply about, we begin the real work of becoming generative learning communities (Marshall, 2006) that

- understand and nurture learning across the system through interdependence, diversity, and innovation;
- value learning as deep, collaborative, continuous, creative, and inquiry-based; and
- embrace the notion that learning results in mind shaping, community shaping, and world shaping—the transformation of mental models as sustainable change.

A generative literacy community is a vibrant, thriving network within which literacy leaders collaborate to accomplish the hard work of learning and literacy leadership.

Professional Standards Supporting Literacy Leadership in Schools

As literacy leaders, we must reflect upon the ways in which our work is intentionally connected to and supported by professional standards. Within the United States, each state has its own body of professional standards for school personnel. In addition, professional associations offer guidelines, standards, and position statements as benchmarks for literacy leadership and literacy education.

In reviewing the Standards for Reading Professionals (International Reading Association, 2010), it is evident that literacy leaders are required to demonstrate proficiency in the foundational knowledge of reading and writing; curriculum and instruction, assessment and evaluation; understanding diversity; creating literate environments; and professional learning and leadership. Literacy leaders—including students, parents, teacher assistants, school staff, and community members—are to aim high in the creation of generative and sustainable literacy education, literacy leadership, and learning communities.

Literacy leaders are urged to explore the Standards for Reading Professionals (International Reading Association, 2010). In doing so, give special time and attention to reading and unpacking not only the standards but the *major assumptions* supporting and driving the standards. In thinking about these assumptions, embrace awe, wonder, and creative tension! Recognize and celebrate your creative engagement in the literacy leadership renaissance we deeply need.

Closing Thoughts

This chapter was a journey into the forays of literacy leadership as community development work. We explored key concepts in literacy leadership and evolving roles of literacy leaders, considered the essence of generative learning communities, and identified the ways in which professional standards support this important work. Inspired by the work of Stephanie Pace Marshall and Margaret Wheatley, we invite all literacy leaders to enter this deeper conversation and community of literacy-leadership work.

At this time, we invite you to hear the voices of literacy leaders in the field as you read and contemplate *The Ethical Literacy Leader* and *Critical Voices* features in this chapter. Following each feature are questions in the *Cultivate Your*

Leadership Skills section to prompt your thinking as you work toward reframing the culture of literacy leadership in your context. To read more about all of our contributors' backgrounds, see the About the Contributors section of this text.



The Ethical Literacy Leader

Sharing the Responsibility for Literacy and Student Learning

—JENNIFER IRELAND

Jennifer is a National Board–certified language arts and reading teacher currently teaching at Lakeridge Middle School, Sumner school district, in Washington State. She serves as the instructional team leader and also as the building learning coordinator, building professional learning communities to improve student learning.

Three years ago the district administration where I work gave a directive to increase reading and math scores by 10 percent as we continue to work toward our adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals. As leader of the district's eighth-grade interdisciplinary team, I facilitated meetings so my colleagues and I could develop a plan to address the needs of our students.

Our team comprises two teachers for each content area of science, math, and English as well as one special education teacher. As teachers and literacy leaders, our team believes we have an ethical responsibility to build literacy across the content areas to prepare students for their future academic, professional, and personal lives. We build our instructional goals on this strong ethical and philosophical foundation.

After much discussion and analysis of students' work and scores, we found we needed cross-curricular literacy integration and a system of identifying students who struggle with grade-level skills. We discovered our students learn most effectively when immersed in common language: vocabulary that has been identified for application in all content areas. We knew that common language would

deepen students' comprehension in the individual content areas and develop an understanding of how the disciplines overlap in the real world. Our team decided on common language and metacognitive process questions that could be used in all of our classrooms. We planned to use these common terms across the content areas: "infer," "explain," and "analyze." We composed specific reading process questions.

We focused our weekly team meetings on planning a structured process for students to receive additional instruction during a weekly 60-minute advisory time. Each content-area teacher brought a list of students who were identified, based on common classroom assessments, as needing further help on a skill. We sorted our students according to their needs. By working together, we were able to negotiate a focus for each session: math, science, or English. We made the groups small (15 students) and the rest of us took on larger groups for enrichment. Our administration was highly supportive of our restructuring of our advisory time and allowed us the opportunity to take this risk in reshuffling students each week.

After a semester of using common language and process questions, we found in our classroom discussions and in our students' work examples of our students talking about the similarities among our classrooms. Each of my colleagues was excited to come to our meetings to share the classroom data that they had gleaned from their common assessments. They brought student samples that generated new ideas of how we could work together to improve our students' learning. We discovered that the students were speaking in terms of literacy during class discussions and in their work, as well as reflecting on their own learning, and using similar methods in different classes to communicate their ideas. Further, we found that most of our students (about 70–80 percent) were successfully learning the skills after initial instruction based on common assessment data; about 15 percent needed moderate reteaching, and about 5–7 percent needed intensive instruction following a retake on the specific skill due to significant gaps in previous skills. We were able to catch the 15 percent at the moment they faced difficulty and provide an intervention.

The first year our team continued to meet, seeking further literacy connections. Each member of our team became a literacy leader, creating new lesson plans that integrated literacy concepts tailored to different content-area needs, and exploring natural connections and strategies to help students read and write in the content areas. We saw remarkable growth in these students, not only in our classrooms but also on the state tests that year. The number of our students meeting the standards in science went from 40 percent to 63 percent in two years, in reading from 61 percent to 69 percent, and in math from

49 percent to 52 percent. As a team we believed in our students' ability to succeed in their grade-level content classes by having the support and reteaching opportunity provided in the intervention classes. We are happy to report our ethical and philosophical goals provided a strong foundation on which to build a team-generated plan of instruction and intervention.

As a team, we continue to challenge ourselves and each other, and it is our commitment to student learning and collaboration that makes us all literacy leaders, going the distance and continuing to carve out time during our school day to analyze student data, analyze needs, and reteach. We continually ask ourselves if we are doing everything in our power to ensure the learning of our students. We must consistently evaluate our instruction and creatively address the needs of our students to ensure their learning, because it is their lives, their future, and their ability to become successful adults that are at stake. These are the values we must uphold as ethical literacy leaders.

Cultivate Your Leadership Skills

1. Ravitch (2010) proposes literacy leaders inspire a "renaissance in education" (p. 224). How is Jennifer's team working toward transforming the culture of literacy leadership?
2. How does Jennifer's interdisciplinary team meet the Standards for Reading Professionals (International Reading Association, 2010) outlined in this chapter?
3. How would this feature have been written if Jennifer had taken a Lone-Ranger approach to the administrator's directive to increase reading and math scores?



Critical Voices

Complexities of Literacy Leadership

—VIRGINIA GOATLEY

Virginia is currently serving as the director of research for the International Reading Association. As a faculty member at the University at Albany, she has been involved in extensive collaboration with teachers, students, and teacher educators to use research as the basis for conversations in professional learning communities.

In the midst of a video interview, my coworker recently asked me to share a story about someone who inspired me as an educator and who should be celebrated as a teacher. I thought about this for a bit and my answer surprised both of us. I said it was the children I met along the way, and then provided examples of my first-grade students from long ago, the fourth graders in a research study, my many nieces and nephews, and so forth. With each child, I learn new ways of teaching, facilitating, and creating contexts for success. So, it made sense to me that Chapter 1 starts with a vignette about Mathew as a reader and a writer. Teaching involves learning, and the children are at the heart of how we learn.

Literacy leadership revolves around the complex and integrated nature of teaching and learning. As noted in the chapter, literacy leadership involves many stakeholders and different definitions of what leadership should and could provide. We are in the midst of many changes creating a moment in time where leadership is critically needed. Policymakers are challenging teachers to provide evidence that they are highly effective. State guidelines require students to take high-stakes tests that have critical implications for their own learning environment and the evaluation of their teachers. Administrators, publishers, education departments, and the media are all providing guidelines for how literacy should be taught. In the end, literacy leaders need to be professionals who can make strategic decisions

about what instruction particular children will need to build on their successes and keep high expectations for what they will learn next.

Over time, I have been fortunate to collaborate with many literacy leaders who have been engaged in this complex dynamic of keeping a focus on student learning while navigating the policy, curriculum, instruction, and assessment demands placed upon them. Since the chapter so nicely defines literacy leadership and outlines related roles and responsibilities, it prompted me to consider my own experiences with literacy leaders. I offer some key characteristics of literacy leaders that help provide the framework for successful teaching:

- Literacy leaders are professionals who inquire about their practice and are open to new ideas.
- Literacy leaders take the challenge of improving their practice, rather than relying on the belief they already know all there is to know.
- Literacy leaders build trusting relationships to create a system-wide community where learners are expected to be successful.
- Literacy leaders take responsibility for creating a successful context for learning, rather than blaming others or excusing poor practice.
- Literacy leaders provide professional development to others, but also assume they need to be participants in professional learning as well.

- Literacy leaders are critical consumers of research who stay current with new studies and the implications for practice.
- Literacy leaders are advocates for children and young adults, joining in the policy and instructional conversations to offer their voice in ongoing decision making about required practice.

As I wrote this list, I was thinking of the many teachers, administrators, teacher educators, researchers, and policymakers who are literacy leaders and whom I've met along my educational journey. But, as Chapter 1 encourages us to do, I could easily envision the students as literacy leaders as well, especially when they are given the opportunity to thrive in thoughtful, caring contexts for learning.

Cultivate Your Leadership Skills

1. Virginia provides a bulleted list of key characteristics of literacy leaders in this feature. How does this list connect with the definition of literacy leaders described in this chapter?
2. If literacy leaders may be teachers, administrators, students, and other stakeholders in the learning community, how might the list of key characteristics of literacy leaders in this feature be viewed or accomplished by the various leadership roles?
3. This chapter describes generative learning communities. How do the characteristics of these communities connect with Virginia's perspective of literacy leadership as developed in this feature?

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How is your literacy-leadership work connected to and supported by professional state standards and standards generated by professional associations?
2. Reflect upon your school's mission and vision statements. To what degree do they reflect literacy leadership and sustainable learning for all stakeholders? How might you revise the mission and/or vision with literacy leadership and sustainable learning in mind? How will you fold the revised mission and vision statements into your daily work as a literacy leader?
3. Does open dialogue exist in your local context? If so, which stakeholders are included? Who is excluded? Whom will you invite to join the conversation? What are some potentially positive consequences of this shift in participation?
4. To what degree are place- and community-based education understood and used? Does this warrant further inquiry? To what degree is antioppressive education understood? Does this warrant further inquiry?
5. Coming full circle, reread Michelangelo's quote with which the chapter begins. Now that you've read and reflected on this chapter, in what ways do you see the quote connecting to the culture of literacy leadership?

Practical Applications

How might this chapter apply to your teaching context and experience? Try these activities:

Classroom Activity

Take time in September, and as the school year unfolds, to discover, advertise, and tap into the many ways students, their families, and the local community advance literacy leadership. Focusing on students, cocreate literacy-related interest and skill surveys to discover ways in which students view themselves as literacy leaders. Together, mine the data to discover student strengths regarding literacy leadership. With students, create Go-To posters illuminating which students excel in particular areas. Nurture student expertise by

modeling how students can turn to each other for literacy-leadership support across the school day. The use of surveys, data mining, and distributing expertise can be replicated in this same way regarding family and community literacy-leadership support.

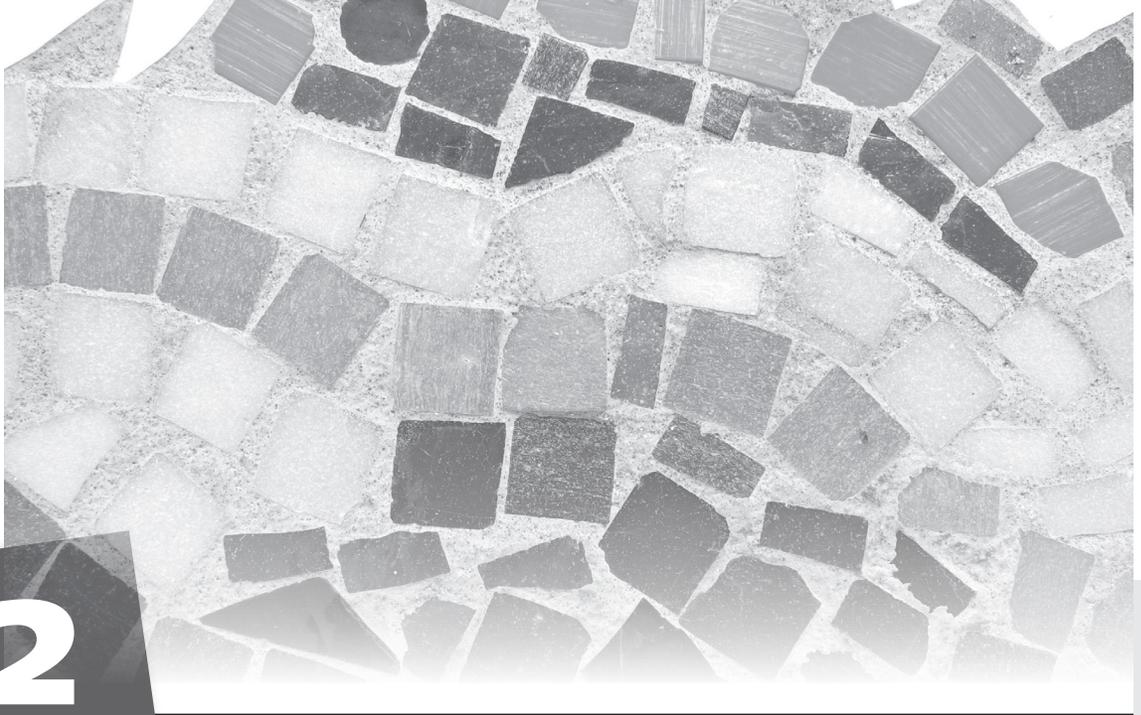
Professional Development Activity

With a group of colleagues, envision the kind of learning community you need in order to thrive as a learner and leader. Share stories about the kind of learning community that currently exists where you work to understand the current reality. Find the gap and create a plan for how you will grow a thriving, vibrant community to meet your needs.

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2

Portraying a Paradigm for Change

“Great things are not done by impulse, but by a series of small things brought together.”

—VINCENT VAN GOGH

Introduction

When we think back to how we felt entering the field of education and literacy, or taking on a new teaching or leadership role within the field, we likely remember moving into the work with energy, passion, and enthusiasm. We remember how in those new beginnings we wanted to know it all, experience it all, and to accomplish it all in a time frame of having it all done . . . yesterday! We wanted to have everything figured out quickly, efficiently, and neatly.

Hopefully, with time spent in the profession, we have grown to acquire a bit of wisdom, learning that wanting to figure out the mystery of it all quickly is valiant, yet impulsive, and the momentum so incredibly difficult to sustain. We agree with Van Gogh. Change in the field of education, literacy leadership in particular, is actualized through a series of processes that creatively emerge and unfold over time. Yes, epiphanies do happen! And we love them for what they are—magnificent bursts of insight. Epiphanies are sudden and wonderful and life-altering. But, the change experience we need for literacy leadership is the kind that is deep, enduring, appreciative, and, above all, respectful.

Literacy leadership is surely a creative endeavor. We are responsible for helping people grow into their own mastery. Our work each day, moment by moment, is marked by how well we are helping others develop their minds, talents, and skills. This is deep work. And, when we seek out quick fixes, we negate our prime objective. An appropriate shift can be made by turning toward philosophy and practices that support our prime objective. Because our calling is deep and humane, literacy leaders need to work from a knowledge base that includes systems thinking, narrative inquiry, and appreciative coaching. This is our paradigm for change.

We turn our attention first to systems thinking. Read Dawn Hamlin's Response to Intervention feature in this chapter for an example of systems thinking and change.

Systems Thinking and Literacy Leadership

Understanding the nuances of literacy education is critical for the literacy leader, but just understanding them is not enough. To be an agent of social change through literacy leadership, we need to learn the nuances of systems thinking to create environments where change is healthy and sustainable. Systems thinking will propel us through the old paradigm of factory-style schooling into a more holistic, ecological, learner-centered, interdisciplinary, and responsive leadership paradigm.



Response to Intervention (RTI) and the Literacy Leader

Moving Targets

—DAWN HAMLIN

Dawn is currently assistant professor at SUNY College at Oneonta. She is a former special education teacher who taught in both traditional public schools and residential facilities.

The RTI movement began in the realm of special education well over a decade ago. It was a response to an ever-increasing population of students who were identified as learning disabled due to a significant discrepancy between their IQ and their achievement. Special education leaders, including Doug and Linda Fuchs among others, realized that something was not working within the traditional paradigm of special education evaluation, identification, and, potentially, general education instruction.

Too many students were not actually learning disabled; rather, they were curriculum and instructional “casualties.” Poor curriculum or ineffective instruction made some students appear to be learning disabled. It appeared that a focus on evidence-based practices and earlier interventions was often missing from the traditional classroom and prereferral process. Decisions based on quality student data were also lacking. Too many minority

populations were over-represented and girls were often under-represented.

Something had to change, and RTI is the result. This was and is a major systems change in the fields of both special and general education. We are still working on getting all stakeholders up to speed on the processes of RTI and how to implement it successfully. One of the hardest challenges has been to parcel out who is responsible for what within the differing tiers of the RTI model.

In spite of the many challenges involved in a major change like RTI, things are looking up. Recent years have seen the number of students across the United States identified as “learning disabled” plateau. Another positive outcome has been that minority over-representation has decreased in school districts where RTI was successfully implemented. Also, more girls who were overlooked are now being identified and receiving support (VanDerHeyden, Witt, & Gilbertson, 2007; VanDerHeyden, Witt, & Naquin, 2003).

Applying systems thinking, literacy leaders can influence the school environment by

- advocating that schools are living systems that continually grow, learn, and change;
- creating learning communities that resemble interconnected networks so information, communication, and collaboration are shared by all;
- coaching others to use cycles and feedback loops so it is easy to see and understand how thinking and behavior influence goal setting, professional

learning, communication patterns, collaboration, shared resources, assessment, and celebration;

- modeling a democratic respect for the sharing of power, voice, and responsibility; and
- promoting health and wellness of people as vital to the development of a healthy organization as a whole.

Using systems thinking, literacy leaders are able to see the whole of school as a learning community and its interrelated parts. With this knowledge base, we can influence school culture and learning for the better. We will be more prepared to help people change their thinking and behavior in ways that truly resonate with the spirit of a collaborative learning community. As we develop in our ability to apply systems thinking, our courage grows and literacy leaders will find themselves ready to engage colleagues in beneficial and complex conversations and learning.

Linking Systems Thinking to Purpose, Philosophy, and Pedagogy

As literacy leaders, it is important to talk with others about the purpose of schooling and education. Yes, our mission and vision statements are posted. It's likely for these statements to be easily read on our school websites and documents for the community. But, when was the last time we *really* checked in with our mission and vision statements? When was the last time we thought about their timeliness? Have we considered recently how these statements are the vital link to our literacy-leadership work? Do we see ourselves as learners and leaders in the wording?

Applying systems thinking to see wholeness and connection between purpose, philosophy, and pedagogy, literacy leaders can work for realignment. (Read this chapter's The Common Core State Standards feature by Tracey Johnson for ideas about how the new standards will help align instruction.) Through complex conversations and learning, literacy leaders can help people align their beliefs about the purpose of school and corresponding educational philosophy and practice. This work must be field based. Yes, it is true that we learned about this in our teacher education programs; but it is within our professional development programs that the link between thinking and behavior manifests and grows! Literacy leaders are responsible for the difficult work of nurturing the positive that already exists while helping others to assess the gap between their espoused theories and the current reality of school and classroom practice. Through realignment, we are helping people grow into their own mastery.



The Common Core State Standards Connection Navigating Implementation

—TRACEY JOHNSON

Tracey's career in education spans over 22 years. She has taught at all educational levels, developed curriculum, provided professional development to persistently low-achieving schools, and mentored teachers. She is currently employed at the New York State Education Department.

The work of a literacy leader is multilayered, requiring perseverance and innovation (Allen, 2006). The role of a literacy leader is not always clearly defined as he or she moves throughout a district into unchartered territories supporting learning and change.

It is in this uncertainty that one has to be clear about what is non-negotiable. Are teachers providing students with opportunities to write creatively, drawing from personal experiences? Are teachers structuring opportunities for students to have conversations and develop arguments based on the texts they have read? Are teachers using prereading strategies to help all students fully understand a text through discussion and/or overviews of context, vocabulary, and the author's craft prior to reading? Are teachers creating learning experiences that build knowledge using informational texts, not just literature? Are teachers providing instruction in academic vocabulary to support students' understanding of complex texts?

The Common Core State Standards is the framework in which all other professional development decisions are made. These standards cross all instructional boundaries and require a clear pathway to be fully implemented effectively.

Nationally, teachers across grades K–12 are in the process of navigating the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. The literacy leader's role becomes less ambiguous as the leader engages teachers and administrators in the process of changing instruction and ensuring that these changes are visible.

From the district office to the parent-teacher conference, the literacy leader has to convey the message that . . . "in the end it will be teachers who make a difference in children's school lives. It is teachers who will either lead the change or resist and stymie it. The focus of school change has to be on supporting teachers in their efforts to become more expert and reorganizing all aspects of the educational system so that they can teach as they expertly know how" (Allington, cited in Allen, 2006, p. 46).

L. M. Zinn (2004), a leader in the field of adult learning, describes how beliefs, values, and worldview or philosophies, whether consciously or not, shape our thinking, the decisions we make, and our corresponding behavior. Oftentimes, what we think, say, and do are mismatched or contradictory! We go about our work believing that all is well. Yet, when we have the support to reflect on this alignment, we may realize there is a gap between our thinking, behavior, and the results we are trying to achieve.

Therefore, we all need to reflect on what we want, what we say we do, and what we are actually doing. It is important for literacy leaders to help others recognize that dissonance is a part of life in general and that it surely shows up within our schools and classrooms. But, we can work on this—and in doing so we will transform lives.

As literacy leaders, we can learn more about critical thinking and how to use it so we can check in on possible discrepancies between espoused theories, the results we want, and the current reality of our minds, talents, and skills. Doing so requires that we move into what may be perceived as uncomfortable or really difficult work. And it is! So, we tend to avoid it.

Literacy leaders are responsible for helping others grow in their ability to examine the discrepancies between beliefs, values, and philosophies and action taken within the school and classroom setting. Please remember that this is gap identification and analysis, *not* to be confused as a deficit framework. We are not looking to find problems. We are not focusing on the negative. What we are doing is helping people to grow in their ability to self-direct change in their own lives. Literacy leadership is about helping people see what is already working, checking in with the results we want, identifying and understanding any gap, and creating change to align our mission and vision, thinking, and behavior. A courageous, collaborative literacy community can do this!

Literacy leaders initiate this kind of work through collaboration and intentional conversation. Our strategy is to discover how purpose, philosophy, and effective literacy practices are at work in the school environment. Learning organizations are host to a variety of diverse beliefs about purpose, philosophy, and classroom practices. How do we figure out what is working?

Here again we apply systems thinking as integral to the dialogue we generate and nurture. Literacy leaders ask the following of themselves and others:

- What are we truly nurturing? Are we developing
 - ✓ intellectual, moral, spiritual, and aesthetic domains (*liberal education*);
 - ✓ skills and behavior change (*behavioral education*);
 - ✓ citizenship, democratic processes, and critical thinking skills (*progressive education*);
 - ✓ personal development and self-actualization (*humanistic education*); and
 - ✓ social change (*radical education*)?
- What is the purpose of education and literacy leadership within our school context?
 - ✓ How does this purpose influence individuals and the learning community as a whole?
 - ✓ How do individuals and the learning community influence the intended purpose?
 - ✓ How does this connect to, and influence, our choice of literacy pedagogy?

- Are the results we seek in alignment with our purpose, philosophy of education, and classroom practice?
 - ✓ What do we see that is inherently good and already working for us?
 - ✓ What changes can we envision and implement for further alignment?

Literacy leaders are agents of social change. Learning and using systems thinking brings into being healthy individuals and learning communities. We value people within systems collaborating and working in self-directed ways, fully in charge of navigating their own learning. We also value empowerment, and therefore work in ways to ensure no individual is marginalized because of poorly aligned purpose, philosophy, and practice. Our deepest and most important work as literacy leaders is to prioritize the health and wellness of our literacy community as a whole.

Next, we turn our attention toward understanding the role of narrative inquiry and experience as integral to literacy leadership for change.

Narrative Inquiry, Experience, and Literacy Leadership

In Chapter 1, we considered the ways in which policy, research, and practice shape life in classrooms and schools. We described current trends and their influence on the day-to-day work we set out to accomplish as literacy leaders.

The main focus of these trends in education is to maximize student achievement. Another result of shifting policy, research, and practice is that we grow more and more accustomed to quantitative methodology, assessment, and evaluation. Scientifically based reading research, evidence-based teaching, data-driven instruction, and standardized assessment surely develop our capacity for quantitative reasoning! This is wonderful for us as we continue to refine our minds, talents, and skills. Remember, we are always growing. However, as literacy leaders, we need to consciously balance our quantitative thinking with the qualitative. Let us explain.

Literacy leaders are inherently interested in life. We are fascinated—and sometimes stymied—by learning and teaching, as we spend our time in dialogue and collaboration with colleagues and students. What is the *essence*, then, of what we are actually doing? We believe that literacy leaders are in the business of studying life in schools. Through dialogue and collaboration, we are busy collecting stories that reveal how learning, teaching, and leadership are experienced by the people living and working in our local contexts.

This is narrative inquiry and the heart of narrative inquiry is *experience*. We don't mean "experience" defined as the number of years teaching, leading, or learning; nor the mastery of any particular set of skills. Experience in our

literacy-leadership context is defined as the moment-by-moment events taking place in our classrooms and schools—the happenings. And it is our interpretation of these happenings that we study. As humans, we turn our lived experiences into stories that we share with others, and this happens all the time through our daily conversations. By paying attention to the stories shared, literacy leaders are able to understand current reality as they experience it, and as experienced by colleagues and students.

Through collaborative work, literacy leaders are able to help colleagues and students use their own stories as templates or texts for learning. Stories help us better understand how learning, leadership, and change are experienced. Vibrant, life-enhancing communities reflect experience through diverse, multiple perspectives. Understanding and appreciating the stories people share shapes new futures, influencing the ways in which people gain momentum to learn, grow, and develop.

We must change our structures, routines, practices, and policies to resonate with the work that needs to happen in collaborative learning communities. Therefore, literacy leaders need to

- value stories as a rich source of qualitative data;
- acquire the ability to frame questions to elicit honest, authentic stories;
- feel comfortable inquiring more deeply into the lives of colleagues and students to better their lives and the life of the organization as a whole;
- work from a source of empathy and compassion when seeking stories and helping others to learn from their stories;
- understand that stories are made up of past, present, and future thinking and that our role is to appreciate *all* the feelings and experiences described;
- recognize how beliefs and values resonate within stories and appreciate the multiple perspectives that are discovered;
- practice active listening to understand someone's experience *and* how words are used to convey the experience;
- teach others how to frame the positive—what is working—and carry the strategies that are positive and working well as possible solutions to difficult situations; and
- be comfortable laying narrative inquiry alongside quantitative thinking for a holistic assessment and evaluation of current reality.

As literacy leaders, we need to know how educators, administrators, and students directly experience the culture of literacy leadership specific to any local context. Valuing the personal, truthful, authentic knowledge of individual and collective experience is a powerful lever for creative change. This information is really a description of current reality. Naming the results we are seeking as literacy leaders is only one step in any change process. It is imperative to know and understand, in truth, what the current reality is to gain momentum for change.

To illustrate the value of narrative inquiry in action, we asked a dear colleague, Linda Sullivan, to reflect upon her life as a literacy leader. In this exploration, we posed a series of questions to better understand Linda's experience. We intentionally look to Linda's beliefs, perceptions, and ways of knowing as connected to literacy leadership and value them as a rich, vibrant, and primary source into which we can glean insight and generate ideas for personal growth and systems-level transformation. Our questions are in bold type. Linda's reflections are italicized.

How are you experiencing the current culture of literacy leadership?

I have experienced literacy leadership as a teacher leader and as a colleague through school-wide and district-wide professional learning communities (PLCs), through participation with literacy coaches and professional staff developers, and through collaboration with colleagues. My experiences in these areas have varied from what I would view as effective (resulting in exploring more effective teaching practices in my classroom) to ineffective (resulting in walking away feeling empty and confused). The cultural attitudes within these venues have also been varied, from openness and willingness toward new and different ideas to resistance. The current culture varies from leadership that focuses on teachers becoming proficient in effective teaching practices to having teachers do nothing more than complete a task.

How do you experience the role of literacy leader? What is it like for you being a model and therefore steward of literacy leadership?

I experience the role with mixed feelings and my role has been inconsistent. At times I enjoy the work. I enjoy being a model, I enjoy talking about my work, and I enjoy getting feedback so I might improve in my own practices as well as being effective in my collaborations with colleagues. When I feel the literacy work and the collaboration are effective (therefore benefiting my students and contributing to a progressive teaching culture), I feel a sense of accomplishment and motivation.

At times I also experience frustration. Although during our literacy work we talk about higher expectations/rigor, sometimes our conversations continue to focus on questions such as "What can we do so they get the right answer?" or "How can we get them to do what we're trying to get them to do?" rather than focusing on student thinking. It is during these times that it is apparent that we do not have common understandings about what good teaching looks like, leaving me to feel not only frustration, but ineffective as a literacy teacher, as I have not been successful in facilitating conversations that focus on core competencies and what it looks like to teach those competencies.

How do you experience changing, growing, and learning within the context of the current system of professional development?

I think the current system of professional development means well. In my experience, we have moved from sending teachers to various workshops without

common intent to having district coaches, literacy consultants, and PLCs, both in district and across our tri-district.

In the past couple of years, I think the system of professional development has deteriorated in our district. We began with having coaches on-site and consultants coming in to work with coaches and staff. Demo lessons in classrooms were conducted; workshops allowed teachers to ask questions and discuss their concerns with certain practices or changes; professional discourse was encouraged; and there was talk of doing learning walks and true lesson studies.

The past two years have shown a different professional development path. PLCs were put in place, but not as real PLCs. They are venues for administrative agendas with expected outcomes based on district goals. Within this current system, I have felt forced to change some of my practices in a manner that I do not see benefiting my students. Discussion about these concerns has been discouraged by redirecting conversations back to the agenda. Therefore, there has not been positive change, learning, or growth based on this model of professional development.

How do you experience changing, growing, and learning in the context of your moment-to-moment literacy-leadership work?

The change, growth, and learning that occur are due to my initiative to seek information and conversation outside the parameters of the district-provided professional development. I talk with other professionals interested in the work of teaching; I read professional-development literature; and I collaborate with colleagues who have the same understandings so that our conversations can move us forward in improving our literacy practices. I “try” these approaches/methods in my classroom and sometimes I share my experiences with my colleagues and sometimes I work alone in evaluating the new approaches. The collegial “tribe” I am speaking of is small, so I experience changing, growing, and learning in a somewhat lonely manner.

How do you experience communication within the broad culture of literacy leadership?

Communication within the broad culture of literacy leadership (defining “broad culture” as “school wide, district wide, and within the tri-district”) is limited in the sense of progressive thinking.

How do you experience communication within the context of your own literacy-leadership work?

Communication within my own literacy work is more effective (in my opinion) than in the broader culture. I believe this is because, in my own literacy work, I collaborate with those who approach me interested in discussing their work—and I seek out those with whom I have commonalities—resulting in our conversations (and ultimate collaboration of work) having effective and, in some cases, powerful outcomes.

How do you experience movement through the reflection process as a literacy leader?

The reflective process has not been a piece of our literacy work in our current professional development structure. On a personal level, it is limited. I think I reflect on my own work, as a leader and a classroom teacher, but I am not sure what questions I should be asking myself, and our PLCs are not conducive to this type of group reflection.

How do you experience working through difficult situations as a literacy leader?

This has not been a positive area. Recently I have not been involved as a leader in the broader sense. I have been expected to be a leader in my grade unit and in tri-district meetings. The difficult situations have been in what I might call “shut-down” in discussing progressive thinking. So, I believed it was necessary to take a step back and angle conversations to where people were in their literacy thinking, and then pose some questions that might get the conversations moving forward. Patience with the conversations and gently probing the ideas are what seemed to be the most effective. However, I experienced walking away from these situations with a feeling that the status quo remained in place. Change is really slow.

**How did you experience this questioning process?
What was this experience like for you?**

This questioning process was difficult because my literacy-leadership experience has diminished over the past two years. The questioning also revealed that my literacy frustration has grown due to that diminished role. Thinking back over the literacy work I have done makes me want to approach literacy collaborations in a way that has us engaging in a continual process of studying our teaching views and values, our methods of teaching, and studying our students and their work in order to strengthen our roles as educators. As I worked through these questions and reflected on my school district and the work that has been done, the fact that literacy work is everyone’s responsibility (across all content areas) has been reaffirmed, along with my belief that all students (every learner) must have access to the thinking work that strengthens literacy skills. This, therefore, makes me think about our “special-ed” services in our schools and the ever-growing importance of including those teachers in our literacy work. Along with reflecting on the progress and road blocks of literacy leadership, this questioning process has raised some additional concerns about the importance of moving forward with this work.

We would like to first thank Linda for her willingness to share her experiences and reflective thinking with honesty and grace. This is the hallmark of respectful, trusting, and collaborative relationships. What does Linda’s experience and reflective thinking open us up to realize? In valuing Linda’s experience, we come to understand that she

- is an experienced literacy leader;
- easily differentiates effective and noneffective professional learning experiences;
- readily perceives fluctuations in school culture and fluctuations regarding the purpose of professional learning;
- has felt accomplished and motivated within the context of particular learning and leadership conditions;
- is able to quickly pinpoint where common literacy knowledge and understanding do converge, and also to identify gaps where convergence breaks down;
- may be feeling frustrated because she is not being challenged to delve deeply enough into her own learning to work differently with her students;
- sees her environment as rich in resources;
- views her learning and work as co-opted by administrative agendas that do not align with effective learning, growth, and development;
- is self-directed and initiates networking to learn beyond the environment in which she physically works;
- experiences professional learning as lonely;
- finds broad communication lacking in progressive thought (Linda does communicate with those who share common interests in education);
- has not engaged in professional learning that is reflective in nature;
- is open to learning how to develop questions to guide reflective thinking;
- perceives PLCs as not conducive to reflective thinking;
- understands how to flex her questioning strategies and conversation starters to meet the learning edge of colleagues;
- is keenly aware of how the status quo is perpetuated in spite of professional learning situations;
- values holding a larger role in literacy leadership;
- advocates for studying teaching views, values, and methods; advocates for studying students and their work; understands the process is mutually enhancing for development and growth of both student and teacher;
- believes in shared literacy leadership;
- values inclusion of special education teachers in the professional learning process; and
- advocates for moving forward with literacy-leadership work.

In studying Linda's account of her experiences and reflective thinking, we come away with a rich tapestry of valuable information. There are serious implications for change at work here! Because we know, understand, value, and

empathize with Linda, we are in the position to cocreate change. Knowing how she experiences literacy leadership, we can engender—*do more of*—what is working for her and alter aspects that could be working better. Above all else, by connecting to Linda’s experience, we can see that a responsive and respectful environment for learning and leading must be established. Creating clarity in common language, purpose, and vision is the container for all next steps. Learning needs to be the work of—the shared responsibility of—administrators, teachers, and students. There are many, many points of positive departure here for change. Honesty and respect cultivate the depth learning communities require. How might you collaborate with Linda to cocreate a learning community that will engage her on a deeper level so she once again is motivated and challenged toward a new learning edge?

Narrative inquiry is such an integral process to literacy leadership. Because learning, teaching, and leadership are inherently tied to who we are as people, how we think and behave, we need a process for changing our work to that which is humanistic and real—one that allows us to dig deep. Narrative inquiry as a way of thinking and being is really a bridge for literacy leaders. It helps us see that stories are the playing field of change. We need to be on the field to help transform the field.

When literacy leaders understand what narrative inquiry is, and how to use it, we will be well on our way to creating renaissance communities. We *can* bring these life-enhancing communities into being. We hope you hold an enhanced understanding of the purpose and value of collecting and studying life stories.

Across this chapter so far, we explored systems thinking; considered the necessity of aligning purpose, philosophy, and pedagogy; and opened ourselves to narrative inquiry. To complete our paradigm of change, we are turning our attention now to appreciative coaching.

Appreciative Coaching and Literacy Leadership

As literacy leaders, we have experienced “literacy-leadership blocks” at one time or another in our professional lives, affecting us in the same way painters or writers are suddenly cut off from their own ability or inspiration in their craft. Passion and purpose abound, yet we find ourselves feeling like we need a larger container for our work and that our skills are not sufficient for the new work that needs to be accomplished in complex learning environments. At first, the feelings that confront us are truly disturbing—and so is the self-talk that accompanies them. It goes something like this:

I’m inadequate, totally confused, and unskilled! I’m too small for the task that needs to be accomplished. I can’t do this. Maybe it’s just a slump. Oh, okay, it’s

just me working from a deficit model and I can see the glass—nope, not half full, it's not even a quarter of the way full! Wait, there's not even a drop in the glass! Nothing that I do is working.

Pretty bleak, huh?

Well, we can look at this self-talk, this story, and stay in the negative. Or, we can look at it and find the humor and humanity in the situation. We opt for humor and humanity. In fact, we make the conscious choice to focus on how the experience brings forth positives for us and the meaning it provides for our next steps. We are not looking at this story through rose-colored glasses and brushing off the hurt that comes along with the feelings of relinquishing who we used to be as we fight the need to try something new. We are honoring the reality of the hurt and using it to build momentum for positive change. So, in looking at our shared story, what are the positives? In the self-talk just described, we are reflective people. We have the sense that something more is needed. We understand that the task of change is huge and complex. We see and recognize that deficit-model thinking creeps into our work even when we try to keep it at bay. We admit when we are seeing the glass as really empty. And above all, we are empowered to express our truth through authenticity and honesty. *We are open and willing and needing support.* But what kind of support do we need?

We may not be looking for, or believe that we need, a leader to teach us more about literacy strategies. In fact, we do this very well on our own as self-directed learners. But, maybe the kind of learning we do need—the kind of support we need—is to learn how to tap into our strengths to achieve the more difficult-to-acquire results we really, really want and desire. So, what is the actual strategy that a literacy leader would use in this situation? We need to explain that it isn't a strategy at all—at least not in the traditional sense. Instead, we need to approach this next concept as a way of thinking and being that gently puts to use systems thinking, narrative inquiry, and appreciative leadership. The literacy leader needs to be an appreciative coach!

Appreciative inquiry, appreciative leadership, and appreciative coaching are prominent ideas within the field of organizational development and change. The efficacy of this work is long standing, research based, and often used to create positive change in business, government, psychology and the social services, and education. Literacy leaders will truly benefit from studying its philosophy and practical applications to create a larger—and more humane—container for our work in classrooms and schools. We need to synthesize the key ideas as a coaching framework and apply it to literacy leadership as a way of thinking, being, and creating within the context of our work. The key ideas of appreciative inquiry, leadership, and coaching are to be shared, used, and celebrated throughout the organization—it is not the property solely of literacy leaders as the secret to literacy-leadership work. It is important to understand that, as with systems thinking and narrative inquiry, appreciative coaching is an applied

philosophy and process used as we mentor and coach each other in partnership and collaboration.

Within the context of literacy leadership for change, everyone is a literacy leader. Therefore, everyone—colleagues and students alike—needs to learn the knowledge and skills to be appreciative coaches. Literacy leaders know how to access and encourage others to learn literacy-related content. What we need to revolutionize is the way we go about the work of helping others, using systems thinking, narrative inquiry, and appreciative coaching. While we cannot provide an in-depth understanding of appreciative inquiry, leadership, and coaching here because the knowledge base is deep and wide (and needs to be read as such), what we can do here is provide a list of recommendations for literacy leaders regarding how to begin thinking about appreciative coaching as a necessary component of literacy leadership for change.

To begin, we should start with shared definitions. Appreciative inquiry “is a high-engagement strengths-based process through which people collaboratively reinvent the vision, mission, strategy, culture, and identity of their organization or community” (Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, & Rader, 2010, p. xvi). Therefore, appreciative leadership “is the relational capacity to mobilize creative potential and turn it into positive power—to set in motion positive ripples of confidence, energy, enthusiasm, and performance—to make a positive difference in the world” (p. 3). It is easy to see that this body of work resonates so well with how we are trying to approach our work each day as literacy leaders. Appreciative inquiry and leadership offer a philosophical and practical framework to guide the way we conduct literacy-leadership work each day. What we draw from this framework is a way of coaching others for peak performance and positive, creative change.

In essence, as literacy leaders, we need to frame “coaching” not as a full-blown job description, but as the way we approach our conversations and collaboration. We need to believe that every conversation and action taken alters reality in ways that may be good or bad. No matter what, conversation and events are taking place in classrooms and schools. How we approach these conversations and events needs to be part of what we study in literacy leadership—as we do with stories. We recommend that literacy leaders infuse five core strategies into their work as agents of change. Literacy leaders are engaged in “coaching work” when they

1. inquire into the lives of colleagues and students to learn their strengths, talents, desires, and success stories and they find out what people *really* want;
2. ask colleagues and students to share stories that illuminate strengths, effective practices, and achievement;
3. include many people—many voices—in dialogue and collaboration while enhancing the quality of how people relate to each other;

4. inspire people to work from what is already positive, to achieve beyond the status quo in ways that are realistic for colleagues and students while living and relating appreciatively; and
5. model integrity.

These five core strategies of appreciative inquiry and leadership provide us with a new way of thinking about the coaching skills we need as literacy leaders to cultivate life-enhancing learning communities. Literacy leaders also benefit by drawing upon the work of Orem, Binkert, and Clancy (2007), as these experts in the field of appreciative inquiry provide an in-depth understanding of appreciative coaching processes. Four key processes are listed here for you as applied literacy-leadership work. When literacy leaders coach colleagues and students moment by moment, our practice includes helping others to

- discover and appreciate the good that *already* exists in their experiences, talents, skills, and ability;
- dream—expand their thinking—about what it is they *really* want to create in their classroom and school environment;
- design a picture or vision of the results they want to create and action steps needed; and
- achieve their destiny by celebrating current work that is realizing the dream.

This is the deeper and most authentic work of literacy leadership!

We now turn our attention to an example of an appreciative interview—appreciative coaching—in action. Dana Jackson, our colleague and dear friend, shares her thinking and experience of literacy leadership with us as she engages in a conversation with Kristine. Kristine comes to this conversation with appreciative inquiry and leadership as her knowledge base and uses this knowledge to frame questions that encourage honest and respectful dialogue. Kristine is not interested in changing Dana. Kristine is interested in discovering what Dana values. This insight is what influences how *Kristine* changes, flexing the way she needs to support Dana as opposed to how she would offer support for someone else. Within this context, the essence of literacy leadership shifts to differentiating the way we design support systems for colleagues and students! This is honest literacy-leadership work.

Please know that Dana and Kristine’s conversation is ongoing, in person, and online! It is never finished. At times it is formal; other times it is informal. The dialogue is always growing and changing. We are able to share with you an aspect of this interview that models a more formal stance. Kristine’s contribution is in bold type. Dana’s contribution is italicized.

Dana, what gives life to you now, in this moment, as a literacy leader?

Looking at how schools will implement the new Common Core State Standards is interesting to me right now. I think one of the most interesting topics within the Core is text complexity and vocabulary acquisition. Teachers tend to be married to books, but I think there will, hopefully, be some real discussions about whether the texts teachers are married to are appropriate for those grade levels. Just because a book is long, or you have great lesson plans for the book, doesn't mean that the book may be complex enough for the given grade. I also say vocabulary acquisition, because I don't think schools have yet to pin down a meaningful way to get at vocabulary at the secondary level. Rote memorization doth not a large vocabulary make.

Can you tell me more about your vision for these kinds of discussions that you'd like to have with others?

It's not that I would like to have these discussions per se; it's that there needs to be more authentic discussion in education if you truly want to improve student learning. So much of what I see tends to be haphazard; there's an assumption that if you put teachers together, they will suddenly start to talk about improving student learning. That isn't so at all. There needs to be deliberate, thought-filled action if the intention is to improve teachers with the purpose of improving student learning.

Describe a high point or peak experience in your life as a literacy leader.

Perhaps becoming the literacy coach at the high school level. I say this because I don't know if it allowed me to lead where literacy was concerned. Yes, I supported teachers, but oftentimes it had very little to do with improving student literacy.

What is your picture or vision of effective literacy leadership?

I don't know yet. I don't know if a model of coaching, at least at the secondary level, is effective. I'm still attempting to determine where the literacy leadership needs to begin.

What do you value most about yourself, your relationships, and the nature of your work?

I value my desire to think deeply about things. I also love to learn and I hope to transfer that enthusiasm to students. I don't know if it always works, but that has been my goal to some degree. I think it's important that people think purposefully, particularly in this complex world today.

What one or two things do you want more of in your life as a literacy leader?

More time and more opportunities to work with all the players involved in improving the literacy of our adolescents. I think we as a community who are involved

in the education of our youth, including the youth themselves, don't interact in a real way. Much of what we do is affectation (PDs, parent conferences, common planning, evaluations, meetings). A lot of it is talk because there is some sort of political agenda (both real and imaginary) that must be executed. The only ones who suffer in the long run are the students. Enough of the idle chatter and let's get to the work of learning.

We'd like to thank Dana for her contribution. Her dialogue is honest, open, and real. As a whole, this “slice of life” shows what Dana is thinking and opens up so many possibilities for how we as literacy leaders can change. Kristine comes to the conversation with only one agenda—to support Dana in the achievement of her own goals. In supporting Dana, Kristine needs to frame questions that are deep and expansive. She frames the conversation to open up *possibility*. Kristine is also aware of the need to flex inner responsiveness and an outer responsiveness. Not only is she responsible for her own inner change, Kristine needs to also take action to change structures of the learning environment to enhance learning, growth, and development.

Appreciative coaching is much like narrative inquiry. As literacy leaders, we draw from what is honest, real, and working. We pull forward what is already life-enhancing to further shape our inner and outer environments. Appreciative coaching is literacy leadership. Folding this into our approach empowers everyone involved. We will be working from a core self that is most authentic, least marginalizing, antioppressive, and true to our prime objective—respectful transformation.

Closing Thoughts

Collaborative learning communities are complex, living systems. Authentic and respectful change will come into being as literacy leaders engage colleagues and students in systems thinking, aligning purpose, philosophy, and pedagogy, sharing stories of lived experience, and engaging in our deepest work through appreciative coaching. This is the change paradigm for literacy leadership! Although the work is vast, we, like Van Gogh, value the deeper terrain of change and know that our best work comes into being through the synchronicity of small, patient steps.

At this time, we invite you to hear the voices of literacy leaders in the field as you read and contemplate *The Ethical Literacy Leader* and *Critical Voices* features in this chapter. Following each feature are questions in the *Cultivate Your Leadership Skills* section to prompt your thinking as you work toward portraying a paradigm for change in your context. To read more about all of our contributors' backgrounds, see the *About the Contributors* section of this text.



The Ethical Literacy Leader

The “A for Effort” Dilemma

—JILL LEWIS-SPECTOR

Jill is vice-president of the International Reading Association and has served on its board of directors (2004–2007), as president of IRA’s LEADER Special Interest Group, and as chair of the IRA Governmental Relations Committee.

Developing literacy skills of underprepared college freshmen has been a personal and professional challenge during my nearly 40 years of teaching. The ethical dilemmas I have confronted were initially mine alone, especially when failing a student might mean the end of that student’s college career; passing indicated that I believed the student would be successful in college. More troubling was that even if students demonstrated comprehension of the department-selected texts used in our remedial reading courses, I knew these materials bore little resemblance to the complex texts students would be expected to comprehend in later academic studies. I was a good teacher; the students had good intentions and many worked hard in our classes. But I felt some would have found community or technical college vocational programs more beneficial.

The challenges my dilemmas posed became even more apparent when I became department chair. In an effort to meet budget needs, the university began admitting large numbers of remedial students, and the number of our department’s remedial reading courses grew significantly. As chair, however, I had the potential to lead reform efforts with colleagues that addressed what I considered an unethical university admissions practice: encouraging so many underprepared students to pass through what I saw as a “revolving door,” taking some students’ tuition for one or two semesters while knowing, from the start, they would not succeed. As department leader, and to make any reform inroads, I needed to discuss the

issue with colleagues both in and outside the department, gather data with them to confirm concerns, and work with multiple stakeholders to gain support for reform, brainstorm ideas, and implement those we agreed upon.

The first step was to discuss my concerns with my department, explaining the ethical conflict I felt. I hold honesty as a core value, and I believed it was dishonest to pass students who showed little promise of academic success, in spite of enrollment consequences for the department and the university. There were nine members of the department and, as we talked, most expressed a similar personal conflict. We decided to first investigate how students fared both in and subsequent to our basic literacy courses, and then to use the results of this action research to motivate other stakeholders and initiate university-wide discussion. Department members assisted with this research. We found that nearly one-third of our students did not successfully complete the basic-skills literacy courses and were consequently discharged from our university. Furthermore, of the remaining two-thirds, only one-third actually completed a college degree within six years at our university; the remaining one-third were no longer enrolled.

These findings enabled me, as chair, to move ahead and connect with other stakeholders who also might be affected by reform, especially those in the English department, who typically taught basic writing skills to the same students in our Reading for College classes. One writing-skills instructor in the English department,

Walter Glospie, and I had frequently conferred about mutual students. I approached him first. He concurred with my department's concerns and was not surprised by our research findings. Walter became the message bearer to his department that soon agreed that our departments would work together on developing a vision for reform, one that was flexible enough for revisiting and revising when necessary. I was encouraged that out-of-department stakeholders were now on board!

After much discussion with our respective departments' colleagues on an action plan, Walter and I spearheaded designing a unique course, Reading and Writing across the Disciplines (RWAD). Three-person RWAD faculty teams would be made of one member each from the Literacy Education department, English department, and another content field (general studies) department (e.g., sociology, economics, media). The content faculty member would provide the lead for the team by selecting the content course textbook; the writing and reading instructors would use this text as a basis for instruction. We would meet throughout the semester to revisit course design, and to confer with our respective departments as we continued to reform the skills classes.

This course design meant we needed to bring members of other departments into the conversation and obtain their willingness to participate. As Walter and I spoke with general studies faculty, what became evident was that the content professors did not realize that many of their freshmen students could not comprehend their texts; they had been attributing students' low grades to a lack of effort. The faculty became intrigued by the idea of a team approach, and professors from the sciences and social sciences departments signed on. The administration granted a small incentive to faculty—0.5 credit for teamwork.

As minimal as it was, this release time for planning signaled administrative support for our reforms.

It has been nearly 20 years since Reading and Writing across the Disciplines was first offered, and it does not look exactly as it did when Walter and I designed it. But, the team approach is still in effect, and outcomes for students are better. They encounter academic text in their remedial courses, and they know that a team of professors is working together to address students' literacy needs. I cannot say that my dilemma is completely resolved, but the reality-based instruction makes it easier to identify which underprepared students will succeed in college and to grade more honestly. I see more students graduating who had been in our RWAD classes as compared to the number who remained in college following a semester in our previous remedial reading courses. I feel that, as the department chair at the time, I had provided the leadership needed to address an ethical concern and to provide leadership to faculty of several departments that produced an outcome that better serves our students.

Cultivate Your Leadership Skills

1. In what ways can a systems-thinking lens be applied within the context of this college experience? How does this systems-thinking lens help stakeholders meet the needs of learners?
2. Considering the author's point of view, which purpose of schooling and philosophy of education is evidenced? What is the link between purpose, philosophy, project implementation, and learning outcomes?
3. How is sustainability—sustainable leadership and sustainable learning—positioned as an ethical imperative within the context of this experience?



Critical Voices

Our Collaborative Journey of Change

—SANDRA ATHANS

Sandra is National Board–certified in Literacy: Reading—Language Arts. She is a fourth-grade classroom teacher in the Chittenango Central school district in central New York.

Our literacy instruction needed a severe change! Results from our fourth-grade state language arts assessment emphasized the everyday struggles we witnessed in our classrooms. Nearly half of all students within our six fourth-grade classes squeaked by or did not meet state proficiency standards. Beyond this, we instinctively knew that many of our students could not decipher a grade-level reading passage on their own; victims of decoding debacles, fluency floundering, or comprehension conundrums, they were not privy to any of the joys of reading. This had to change.

As classroom teachers, we shared an obligation to *significantly* improve our students' reading comprehension. This united us at the onset of our journey and overshadowed the differences among us: experience, age, knowledge, and beliefs and attitudes about reading instruction. Yet, cementing us together for the duration of our journey was our deep sense of ownership; for the most part, finding a solution was *our* responsibility. We were the ones in the classroom trenches—though we welcomed the support of our specialists and administrators.

Gathering Knowledge to Direct Our Professional Development

Without a clear sense of direction, our first step was to gather information on best practices. Some of us attended local and regional conferences. As funds were slim, we wrote grants and pooled resources whenever possible.

Others reached out to colleagues in neighboring districts to arrange site visits. We read articles and books, and we met as a team every Thursday morning for half an hour before school in order to debrief and devise our next moves.

After careful reflection, we selected guided reading as our focus. It was an approach with proven success at lower elementary grades. We also wished to integrate science and social studies themes into our reading instruction. We hoped this immersion might help shore up weaknesses in our students' content-area reading skills.

Throughout this part of our journey, we shared information regularly, passing noteworthy materials among the six of us. "Use This as You Wish" became the catchphrase we scrawled across a sticky note router. The words captured the spirit of our teacher-initiated, teacher-led collaboration. The message stressed flexibility, encouraged creativity, and was sincere.

Action Research

Integrating our plan came next. We retained elements of our whole-class instruction and introduced small-group differentiated instruction, which was critical for scaffolding our readers. We also allotted time for students' independent practice. We then watched to see what would happen.

Our problems sprang up like weeds: we were short of materials; new classroom management issues demanded our attention;

and our commitment to achieve equity for *all* readers seemed a relentless juggling act. Still, our team stuck together and shared resources, helpful ideas, and backbone support with the same collaborative spirit.

As a result, eventually our challenges were replaced by glimmers of progress. We were encouraged and hoped to verify our students' gains through action research. We conducted our first study using a competitive grant we were awarded by our regional teaching center. Happily, our findings supported our students' improvements.

Taking the Lead

As we progressed, we shaped and refined our practices and created instructional resources using our collaborative approach. Read-Along Guides, a student comprehension tool, helped us identify how best to target, differentiate, and scaffold our instruction to meet the needs of each student. Literacy Bins, our unique take on literacy centers, fostered students' self-directed learning and complemented our instructional approaches. We studied these tools in our classrooms and refined them as needed.

Where We Are Today

Since the start of our journey, 10 years have passed. In that time, we were awarded 15 grants for professional development, classroom research, and/or the development of instructional materials. We also established cross-grade-level teams in our district and

expanded a collaborative network of teachers outside of our district.

Our students continue to improve, as our test results and our classroom observations confirm. We continue to meet every Thursday morning, despite changes in our team membership. And we still share ideas and materials as well as challenges and new journeys. Our catchphrase "Use This as You Wish" still appears on our sticky note routers, yet it has gone digital and is more often the subject of our electronic correspondence.

We are *highly* indebted to our struggling students. Clearly, the need to change our literacy practices 10 years ago provided the impetus for us to master today's troubleshooting processes. Our teacher-initiated, teacher-led model of collaboration continues to hold up under pressure and is currently in use as we address the Common Core Standards. Change can be very, very good, especially when tackled collaboratively.

Cultivate Your Leadership Skills

1. In what ways does this vignette demonstrate collaborative literacy leadership? How did this collaborative approach influence the school as a living system?
2. How is literacy leadership positioned as experiential learning within this system?
3. What patterns of influence can you see as the purpose of education, philosophy, and literacy practices intersect in this vignette?
4. How is literacy leadership sustainable within this context? What is working well? How else might you influence the system?

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Reflect upon the current reality of literacy leadership in your school. How is systems thinking already in place? How else might it evolve?
2. As a literacy leader, how does your thinking and behavior influence the school environment? How are you influenced by the school environment? What changes would you like to make to increase health and wellness for self, others, and the school?
3. How will you further your own understanding and mastery of systems thinking, narrative inquiry, and appreciative coaching?

Practical Applications

How might this chapter apply to your teaching context and experience? Try these activities:

Classroom Activity

Choose one week of the school year and devote it to thinking about systems. Through reflective journaling, consider how your thinking and behavior influence your students. What do you notice? In turn, how are students influencing you and each other in the classroom? How is everyone influenced by—and influencing—curriculum, instruction, and assessment? What do you notice? What changes would you like to make? How might you teach your students systems thinking to shift the classroom environment in positive ways?

Professional Development Activity

Appreciative inquiry is such an interesting field of study! Organize a book club to better understand the philosophy and practical application of appreciative inquiry, appreciative leadership, and appreciative coaching. As you read, keep a list of key points to share with your book club colleagues. When you meet, share the key points you find so valuable and applicable to creating change in your local context. Discuss ways you can implement appreciative inquiry and coaching so that it becomes integral to literacy leadership.

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