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Literacy Leadership: A Perspective from Higher Education

Annemarie B. Jay

Current educational literature is replete with information about literacy leadership (Bean, 2009; Bean & Dagen, 2011; Jay & Strong, 2008; McAndrews, 2004; Taylor, 2004); however, most of it relates to K-12 education with little to none of the literature focusing on higher education. Instructional leadership, a concept often paralleled with literacy leadership, is a topic that surfaced in the 1980s and remains in the forefront of educational literature today (Jenkins, 2009; Smith & Andrews, 1989; Taylor & Gunter, 2006). Instructional leadership emphasizes the role of principals and other school district administrators as prioritizing instructional improvement rather than their managerial responsibilities.

Greater accountability to increase student performance in the 21st century is a common petition in today's educational and political arenas. Government mandates and public pleas demand that schools quickly step up to meet today's challenges as well as the challenges of the future. The importance of effective K-12 classroom teachers as necessary literacy leaders who are "essential first responders to facilitating literacy learning" (Lewis-Spector & Jay, 2011, p. 1) cannot be diminished. All children deserve a good education facilitated by highly qualified K-12 teachers. Yet the role of those teaching in higher education should not be ignored or minimized. University professors who prepare teachers play an essential leadership role in enhancing the skills and dispositions of their adult learners. I posit that leadership for improving both teaching and learning begins with the preparation teachers receive under the aegis of their professors; higher education plays a vital role in shaping literacy leadership across our nation's classrooms and within those teachers and administrators directly responsible for student engagement in learning, meeting the needs of today's diverse classrooms, and accurately assessing the outcomes of those endeavors. The purpose of this article is to share a perspective about the influence higher education can capably cast upon present and

future educators.

Defining Literacy Leadership

In order to provide a realistic perspective from higher education, a clear, inclusive definition of literacy leadership needs to be established. Those who have written about this topic typically shared the qualities and principles of literacy leadership, but rarely provided a concise, complete definition of the term. A fundamental goal of literacy leadership, both nationally and locally, is to promote reading and writing throughout our society. However, literacy leadership extends well beyond the promotion of reading and writing (Achterman, 2010). In addition to determining what literacy leadership is, today's educators need to focus on what it can be.

Literacy leadership is the ability to clearly and collaboratively convey one's expert knowledge of literacy processes and practices in guiding teachers, administrators, and all community stakeholders to make literacy education a priority by creating an environment in which all children succeed. Literacy leadership also includes the ability to inspire teachers to be reflective practitioners of their craft and to continuously seek learning related to child development and pedagogical best practices. Those who assume literacy leadership must be experts in the field of literacy (Lewis-Spector & Jay, 2011).

Multi-faceted Perspective

Why should literacy leadership include those who teach in higher education? Instructing undergraduates who aspire to teaching positions in K-12 classrooms requires strong knowledge of teaching processes, human development, and discipline-related content. Although it is admirable that many undergraduates consider a teaching career because they had a positive school experience and were influenced by at least one caring, nurturing teacher, those reasons are unsubstantial for entering the profession. As

course instructors, professors need to ensure that training soon-to-be and novice educators entails holding their students to high standards for their academic skills, decision-making, meeting required deadlines, appropriate peer interactions with the classroom, and respectful, professional interactions with children and school personnel during field experiences and student-teaching. Transforming teachers who enter graduate education programs from good to highly effective teachers is essential so that all students receive instruction from experts with child-centric views of learning that are crafted to meet their particular learners' needs. Assigning is not the same as teaching. We've known for a long time that a one-size fits all mentality about instruction creates gaps in children's learning; therefore, following publishers' instructional scripts with little thought about the people we are teaching is generally unproductive, and sadly, often futile.

Professors in undergraduate and graduate education programs have the capacity to dispel common misperceptions about instruction and to confirm sound theoretically-based practices by modeling good instruction in their own classrooms. Good teaching involves modeling followed by carefully guided practice before students are afforded the opportunity to apply newly learned skills on their own. These steps of the teaching act need to occur in college classrooms as well as in K-12 settings. Preparing teachers under our guidance before they work independently in classrooms is an auspicious undertaking with powerful outcomes for both teachers and their students. Those who teach in higher education represent a steadfast link in the continuum of literacy leadership. Imparting what we know, our literacy expertise, is paramount; imparting who we are, our committed professionalism to our students and our craft, is equally important. The following sections of this article discuss the literacy leadership perspective of higher education through example, participation, and scholarship.

Literacy Leadership by Example

As stated above, literacy leaders must be literacy experts. Content knowledge is foundational to both literacy and literacy leadership (Stein & Nelson, 2003). Higher education professionals who teach courses that prepare and strengthen teachers, need to consistently exhibit effective

pedagogy in addition to possessing knowledge of literacy processes. In addition, literacy leadership from higher education instructors should include: designing curriculum to meet the needs of students, self-reflection of instructional practices including lectures, activities, projects, and assessments, and collaborating with peers.

Reflecting. Having the chance to teach a course multiple times enables one to discern where one area of the curriculum may need more or less attention for the general good of the students. Students' oral and written feedback to their professors is often helpful in understanding how students conceptualized the processes and content of an education course, and assessed the worthiness of the course. One university recently used such feedback to adjust the reading/language arts field placements of their undergraduates: students in an Early Years Pre-K- 4 certification program clearly reported that they felt they had too many experiences in Pre-K and kindergarten classrooms to the detriment of experiences in other primary grades. Adjustments were made by the program's instructors to provide a balance of experiences across the grades. As literacy leaders, professors should particularly heed such feedback once their students are in the field.

Meeting students' needs. Individual students who experience difficulty during a course are recognized by their professors. Meeting with struggling students to determine specific needs is a professional obligation. Modeling for the struggling student what good teachers do to facilitate the learning of their students outside of a whole-class situation (i.e., identifying the learning need and targeting instruction to meet that need) is an opportunity to emulate one of the best practices these students will utilize one day in their own classrooms. It is also an opportunity for the professor to learn which adjustments might need to be made in his teaching techniques or resources used for the class.

Reflecting on students' feedback, whole-class and individual meetings with students, one's own perspectives on strengths and weaknesses of a course, the time and energy in preparing a course and each course session, and the use of technology as a teaching/ learning tool for the course are all important considerations for the practitioner in higher education. Self-reflection

is critical for all educators; the focus of literacy leadership remains on the core of teaching and learning.

Collaborating. Collaborating with peers is another way that literacy leadership is made evident by one's example. Department meetings, depending on the department size and level of formality of meetings, may or may not be the best gathering to delve into rich discussion about individual courses and overall education programs. When faculty make the time to discuss curriculum and the resources they've found to be of either great or little value, they help each other to grow as professionals. Honest, detailed collegial conversations also enrich the programs professors provide for their students. Additionally, inviting colleagues to observe us in person or electronically, and then provide feedback, is yet another way to strengthen our teaching skills and emerge as more able literacy leaders.

Literacy Leadership by Participation

A plethora of organizations function as conduits to professional dialogue, service, and camaraderie. It is essential for higher education professionals to participate in the larger educational community to share their expertise, exhibit leadership qualities, and enhance their own and other's instructional practices. Participation in professional organizations, regional school visits, university-sponsored conferences, and the mentoring of K-12 teachers are strongly encouraged.

Professional organizations. Higher educational professionals often belong to organizations that foster the participation of university scholars/researchers. Such membership is critical to the career of professors. However, university professors should also strive to participate in additional educational organizations that include K-12 practitioners and administrators. State and local council affiliates of the International Reading Association (IRA) are wonderful organizations that embrace the active participation of K-12 and university teachers. The sharing of ideas, forming of committees, collaborative work on projects, and co-presenting at conferences provide venues for professional interaction between higher education and compulsory education professionals. As direct outcomes of collaborative participation, the networks formed among these collective literacy

leaders are assets to professional growth.

Regional K-12 schools. Higher educational professionals should make it a point to establish relationships with the schools in which their adult students teach. Graduate students are wonderful liaisons between their professors and school administrators in extending invitations to schools for visiting classrooms, assisting in professional development, participating in book clubs (or even leading one), and collaborating on a service project. We learn not only within our classrooms, but outside of them as well. Having opportunities to spend time in regional schools is a tremendous experience for professors who otherwise might not have access to local schools. Professors who make school visits can observe instruction in classrooms, meet with principals about their school's literacy goals, and informally chat with teachers about the strong and weak issues they feel are present in the curriculum. Being able to see first-hand what practitioners typically do for literacy instruction and assessment is a golden opportunity for higher educational professionals. Such opportunities may even lead to collaborative research with teachers and administrators and enrich literacy leadership perspectives for all involved.

University-sponsored conferences. In addition to visiting schools, it is advantageous for higher education professionals to invite teachers and administrators to visit the university to attend conferences and seminars facilitated by the education department. Teachers and administrators welcome opportunities to attend these professional development sessions outside of their schools. With schools' current financial constraints or policies disallowing teachers to be away from the classroom for more than a day, it is difficult for teachers to attend national conferences (Jay, 2010). Reading specialists, literacy coaches, curriculum directors, and principals welcome opportunities to co-facilitate and co-present at local events sponsored by universities. When professors and their students share mutual respect, professional partnerships develop that may include writing and presenting together.

Mentoring practicing teachers. Another form of participation within literacy leadership is the mentoring of current and former students. In particular, as graduate students take on new roles

within their current schools or move on to different districts, a respected professor is often asked to meet with them to discuss both theoretical and practical considerations of the new role. There is an old saying: a teacher never knows where her influence ends. When mentoring educators who are reading professionals and/or who have administrative responsibility, one's influence may affect hundreds of teachers and students. Recently, I have participated in two such mentoring relationships. Jane, a former graduate student who achieved reading certification in addition to her master's degree, worked in a school close to the university where I teach. I had the opportunity to visit her first grade classroom many times and engage in discussions with Jane about the wonderful literacy lessons she provided her students. After a few years, Jane left that school for a leadership position in a school in another city. Although she still had some teaching responsibilities, Jane's primary focus became coaching teachers. She and I continue to meet monthly to discuss her current situations with instruction, time management, and professional interactions. Robin, a doctoral student very near completion of her program, recently applied for the position of curriculum director in the high school in which she has been teaching for almost a decade. We met three or four times to discuss interview topics, how the new position might alter her relationship with fellow teachers, and the demands of mapping curriculum and implementing curricular changes. These students sought my counsel as a literacy leader; I learned much from the discourse with them as they embarked on new leadership roles. Mentoring opportunities are mutually beneficial.

Literacy Leadership through Scholarship

The scholarship of university professors is evident through their research, writing, and presenting. These scholarly areas can influence other educators by the theory-practice connections they offer. Collaborative work with either university colleagues or classroom teachers engages others in leadership roles and expands the body of knowledge on literacy teaching and learning. A recent issue of an educational journal themed *How Not to Go it Alone* stressed the importance of collaborative cultures and continuous improvement within schools. One author (Anrig, 2013) addressed collaboration in the

Common Core Era by reminding us that there is a "growing body of research" (p. 12) demonstrating the positive outcomes of collaborative educational relationships.

As mentioned earlier, joint efforts between higher education teachers and K-12 teachers through membership in professional organizations is a good way to collaborate on scholarly work. This is especially true when position papers are commissioned by professional organizations and invitees engage in scholarly discussion and writing to meet the goal of addressing focused areas collaboratively. None of us learn in isolation; when scholarship is a collaborative endeavor among literacy leaders, the potential for learning is exponential.

Current Trends and Issues

In addition to the aspects of literacy leadership mentioned here, it is important for those in higher education to keep up-to-date with the trends and issues that are realities for today's teachers. Three major trends and issues drive many of the decisions made in our nation's schools: Common Core Standards (CCSS), data-driven instruction, and teacher evaluations. A basic reality for today's teachers is that these three areas are inter-connected.

Massey (2013) cautions educators to translate CCSS into effective instructional practices "while avoiding frustration and failure among teachers and students" (p. 67). The translation and implementation of CCSS in K-12 classrooms has implications for literacy leadership from higher education. Undergraduate and graduate programs need to explore CCSS so that teachers understand the targeted outcomes of the standards and are prepared for the collaborative work they will need to participate in within their schools. What, if any, are the differences between state standards and CCSS? What resources are particularly helpful for teachers to access? How can university faculty be a part of the translation and implementation of CCSS for schools within their region?

Higher education personnel can help facilitate professional discussions about CCSS in their classrooms as well as in the local school districts surrounding them. Professional development of teachers within their graduate/certification programs and on-site in their own schools should be a major focus of educators

within the higher education community.

Of course, another layer of literacy leadership will need to be found at the school level where leaders guide their teachers through the process of thoughtfully incorporating the standards into the curriculum. School leaders also need to ensure that teachers have adequate time and materials to aptly deliver standards-based instruction. When higher education faculty and school districts combine efforts to assist teachers in substantive learning about CCSS, professors gain the practical knowledge of the implementation process that must occur in the schools. School faculty receives support from literacy experts who provide feedback consistently tied to the ongoing implementation efforts and professional conversations. University faculty can help provide the framework schools need to initiative, implement, and assess their standards-based projects. In such endeavors, literacy leaders learn from crossing paths with each other for the common purpose of ensuring that children are prepared for college and their future careers.

Data-driven instruction is at the forefront of educational accountability. The term is hardly uttered without standards and teacher evaluation being mentioned in the same sentence. Higher education professionals can provide their literacy expertise by sharing their knowledge of relevant data sources and helping teachers analyze the data so that more effective instruction is provided to their students. Valid and reliable data are tools that should be used to determine what teaching methods are best for each student (Decker, 2003). Higher education literacy experts can guide teachers to incorporate the appropriate methods based on students' needs. Alleviating large chunks of time between the time data is gathered and when modifications are made to teaching methods is a huge factor in maximizing student improvement. The interpretation and use of data is an area where strong literacy leadership is warranted. Conceptualizing the adoption of instructional improvement as a standard, James-Ward, Fisher, Frey and Lapp (2013) encourage collaboration and interaction among educators. Teacher evaluations are changing to align with CCSS.

According to the Danielson Group (2013), the philosophy of CCSS and the underlying

concepts of the framework for teaching evaluation are very similar. Many states are adopting the framework since they are implementing CCSS or a modified version of the standards. Danielson's four domains (Danielson, 1996; 2008) are core elements of effective instruction regardless of the grade or age grouping of the students. University professors should also recognize each of Danielson's domains as germane to their pedagogical goals. The four areas include: (1) planning and preparation; (2) classroom environment; (3) instruction; and (4) professional responsibility. The domains, which should be obvious to any administrator observing and interacting with teachers, are easily evaluated. However, a portion of the new teacher evaluation framework is strongly tied to data based on student achievement. The four domains are not the only variables that affect student achievement. Evaluating fairly is dependent on recognizing the complexity of teaching and the range of variables that affect every decision a teacher makes. University professors must ensure that those they are preparing to educate children are clearly grounded in Danielson's four domains as a result of their university training. Also, professors must ensure that future and practicing teachers recognize the multiple variables related to student achievement and publicly advocate to stakeholders that schools need the support of families and communities to diminish the causes of negative variables and increase positive ones. Fair evaluation of teachers is critical; those who are repeatedly rated poorly after support should be counseled out of teaching. However, many teachers, especially those in urban settings, work in schools where poverty, crime, medical issues, or other major societal concerns beyond their prevue, need the support of other additional entities. A higher education perspective on literacy leadership needs to include advocacy for strong inclusion of agencies that will help children achieve in school and beyond.

Concluding Comments

The term literacy is bantered about in today's parlance and attached to topics that are both directly and remotely related to skillful reading and writing (information literacy, political literacy, financial literacy, moral literacy). As educators, each of us is a leader in the nation-wide (and global) promotion of literacy. Literacy leadership,

the ability to collaboratively convey one's expert knowledge of literacy processes and practices in guiding others to make literacy education a priority for all learners, may be conceptualized as a transactional responsibility of higher education professionals. University professors should not be discounted as literacy leaders because they are not K-12 practitioners. Most professors are seasoned teachers with a wealth of expert knowledge that can (and should be) translated into effective instructional practices in K-12 classrooms. Whether through teaching, writing, presenting, consulting, or collaborating, education professors have an obligation to lead adult learners to enhance their skills so that the improvement of literacy instruction is prioritized in all educational settings.

When higher education faculty and school districts forge relationships in which they collaborate in professional development, all participants benefit. All become more capable of leading literacy learning. The perspective of literacy leadership from higher education is not a top-down paradigm, but rather a collaborative, inclusive model of educators pursuing the goal of maximizing the literacy potential of all citizens. It is this author's sincere hope that literacy leadership is not a short-lived hot topic, but rather an honored, lasting component of effective instruction. Broadening the concept of literacy leadership beyond K-12 classrooms into higher education will reshape the context of literacy leadership and embrace expertise from the university level to inform all educators.

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