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LITERACY

How principals can support teachers and strengthen

LEADERSHIP

reading instruction in elementary classrooms

MATTERS

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1

Creating a Shared Literacy Vision

“Leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality.”
— Warren Bennis

Leadership Matters

Strong leadership in a school is essential. Your role is essential. You set both the tone and the direction for what goes on within your building. I recently had a conversation about two schools with identical architectural blueprints. Despite having the same physical layout, these schools offered me two vastly different experiences. Why? Leadership. In one, the principal created an environment where everyone—students, staff, and guests—felt valued and welcome, where learning was exciting, and where everyone seemed willing to work hard. The other school was quite the opposite: feelings of mistrust, negativity, even judgment permeated the environment. Sadly, staff did not seem especially happy to be there. The identical buildings provided significantly different learning environments.

If we are to create an environment where literacy learning is valued by both staff and students, we must remember that our leadership matters. If we do not have experience or education with literacy instruction, knowing where to begin can be daunting. This chapter addresses important considerations to help with the creation of a shared literacy vision: approaching headlines about literacy instruction, creating an environment of trust, establishing common goals, focusing on pedagogy, using common language, reconsidering school-wide practices, building capacity, becoming literacy leaders in our schools, and finding the funds.

Fumbling Through the Headlines

One of the challenges of leading an elementary school, with the foundations of literacy at the core, is figuring out what makes literacy instruction most effective. You may have noticed an influx of headlines and news stories about reading instruction as of late. The term “the Science of Reading” is used with increasing frequency. Everyone seems to be weighing in on the argument about what

is considered best practice for literacy instruction, especially when it comes to reading. The Ontario Human Rights Commission put out the *Right to Read* report. The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario submitted an official response. Across the country, there have been significant curricular shifts in literacy instruction. The public debate has brought many stakeholders to the table with a varying amount of experience with, research into, and understanding of the topic. For elementary teachers who pride themselves in the teaching of reading, the conversation can sometimes feel personal, like an attack on their teaching.

In their book, *Shifting the Balance*, Jan Burkins and Kari Yates (2021) outline some of the current prevailing opinions:

Some argue that there is a disconnect between research and classroom practice. Some argue that things are out of balance in the balanced literacy classroom. Still others argue that the methods in many classrooms are making learning to read harder rather than easier, especially for the children most at risk of reading difficulties. (1)

It can be challenging to keep up with what we hear and read, and also to make sense of it all.

Another term that is gaining popularity is *structured literacy*. As Louisa Moats (2020) explains,

Recently, the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) adopted the term *Structured Literacy* to refer to the content and principles of explicit teaching that works best with students who must be taught how to read. (20)

Moats, a well-known researcher in the field, suggests that a more comprehensive term would be *Structured Language and Literacy* to acknowledge all components involved. She goes on to say,

Ideally, a comprehensive program balances skill development with daily writing and reading that is purposeful and engaging. Reading and language instruction should occur within a rich, substantive, knowledge-building curriculum. (20)

As you will see throughout this book, this comprehensive program is what we strive for. A radical change of practice is likely not required in most classrooms. What is necessary, though? What is necessary is an attempt to understand the research and opportunities to reflect on and discuss current practice, leading to intentional adjustments to planning and instruction. The intent of this book is to guide you and your staff through this process.

Creating an Environment of Trust

The teaching of reading often brings with it long-held and passionate beliefs of teachers. Some teachers are quite confident in their methods. On the other hand, there are some teachers who feel insecure about teaching reading because of the limited coursework they received on the topic. Because of these realities, as administrators or literacy leads, we are not wise to abruptly enter the conversation and impose our own learnings or beliefs. Doing so could well accomplish the opposite of what we intend. Instead, the dialogue surrounding these

Just like the students in our classrooms, our teachers have their own strengths and challenges, understandings and experiences. We cannot make assumptions that every elementary teacher has the tools necessary to teach language arts with expertise; teachers often do not want to reveal their weaknesses, especially to their administrators.

"The gardener does not make a plant grow. The job of a gardener is to create optimal conditions."
—Sir Ken Robinson

topics should be open, intentional, reflective, and collaborative. This is much more easily accomplished in an environment of trust. If our teachers feel like we are dictating what is to be done—which might be contrary to what they’ve done for years—we will likely encounter resistance. Instead, consider how you might embark together on this learning journey to improve literacy instruction: sharing research, asking questions, and inviting collaboration, respecting all voices at the table.

In most books, blog posts, or courses about leadership, there is a focus on building a community of respect and trust. We recognize the importance of this environment if we are going to be successful in working toward common goals. Yet this environment is not always an easy one to create. Effective leaders know that to accomplish the big things, they have to be intentional about the little things along the way: a painter has a vision of the end creation but must focus on each small detail to create the overall effect.

My former colleagues have told me that it was one of the little things I did as an administrator that had the biggest impact on them. I wrote short notes acknowledging something I noticed in their classrooms—a stunning bulletin board, a gentle manner with a challenging student, excellent classroom management, an intriguing lesson—and left the notes in their mailboxes. By doing this, I was recognizing their strengths, and I was building community in the process. Teachers appreciated this and many mentioned that they saved my notes over the years. This simple practice helped teachers understand the purpose of my instructional walks, developed strong relationships, and made future conversations about anything from challenging students to classroom instruction much easier.

I was intentional about these notes. In fact, I kept a staff list at my desk. Every week I would try to write five or six notes, working my way through the staff list. I didn’t start at the top and work my way down; I completed the list organically. As I noticed something in a particular class or with a particular staff member, I would write that note and check the name off my list. When everyone had one note, I would start again. My staff didn’t know how intentional this was. The list on my desk not only reminded me to write the notes but also ensured that I wrote something to everyone. I also tried to be attentive to the circumstances and needs of my staff. If I knew someone was having a tough week (because of a challenge in school or a home circumstance), that individual would be sure to get a note. Writing these notes was a little thing to me, but perhaps it was a big thing to that person in that moment.

As a teacher, I have worked on school staffs where I felt valued as a teacher and where I know others felt valued in their roles, too. In these situations, productivity and motivation were high, and everyone was willing to put in the extra effort because we felt valued. Professional reading and discussion? Absolutely. We saw the benefit for our students and were willing to take the time and make the effort to learn and improve our instruction.

In their uplifting book, *Dear Teacher*, Brad Johnson and Hal Bowman (2021) say this to teachers:

While you do have high expectations for your students and want them to give their best, remember that they are human first, and when you focus on things like building relationships and patience, they will actually work harder and be more successful. Students work harder for teachers they like and who like them. (3)

“Leaders need first to take on the role of supportive coach before taking on the role of evaluator.”
(Routman 2014, 199)

Writing notes to your staff may not be your preference. Consider your strengths and your end goal. What will you do to establish trust and show that you value your staff, as colleagues and as people?

The same holds true for you and your teachers. Building relationships, valuing the gifts of those on your staff, respecting them as human beings, remembering that they have lives outside of school, and creating a community of trust are essential. The little things—okay, maybe they’re not so little—enable us to create common goals and have meaningful conversations about best practice, ultimately leading toward our larger goal of effective literacy instruction, affecting our students’ lives forever.

Establishing Common Goals

At the beginning of the school year, I ask teachers their goals for the year. Some schools (or school districts) require this formally of their teachers; however, the reflection and dialogue around goal-setting can also be accomplished informally in the setting of a staff meeting. In elementary schools, almost every teacher mentions—unprompted—something about their students as readers and/or writers. I would be concerned if they didn’t; after all, literacy instruction is vital in our elementary classrooms.

Most school districts require schools to outline their goals for the year (and the strategies they plan to use to meet those goals). Before deciding on your school goals, facilitate a conversation about teacher goals first. That discussion will naturally feed into the conversation about school goals. If your school district outlines specific areas for you to target (equity and inclusion, for example), these areas can then be discussed as they relate to the goals of your teachers.

Administrators have sometimes asked me to assist them in creating their literacy goals. My suggestion is always to consider both staff observations about students and the data from previous years. Data is often the driving force of our goals and also how we measure success. When creating your literacy goals and the strategies you will implement, consider the specific needs within your school.

- Does your data show that students are competent at decoding but need more support with comprehension?
- Are there an inordinate number of students requiring literacy intervention?
- Do you see the need for more intentional teaching of **phonological awareness** and **phonemic awareness**?
- Have you been successful in improving student reading but now need a more intentional focus on writing?
- Does your staff have the resources needed to implement your goals?

In my experience, it is more effective to target one or two specific areas than to write a broad goal and try to accomplish everything all at once. A goal like *To improve student achievement in reading, writing, speaking, and listening* is broad in scope and could be difficult to track and achieve, not to mention being overwhelming for teachers. Instead, it might be more manageable and more effective to target one area. Will this area affect the others? Likely. But keep the goal targeted and specific. This chapter’s Talk Time on page 19 could support you in goal-setting with your staff.

See the Glossary on page 127 for words in bold print.

Focusing on Pedagogy

If literacy underpins all we do in our elementary classrooms, we should be talking about literacy instruction regularly. We move toward what we focus on. By setting aside time for this discussion, it shows what we value in our school. When planning your staff meetings, consider choosing questions from Talk Time one chapter at a time, one element of language learning at a time. This will ensure your discussion is guided and grounded in pedagogy.

Although I have structured this book by separating the various elements of language learning, it is essential that we—and our teachers—realize that these elements are very much interconnected. (We will discuss this more in Chapter 2.) They are so interconnected, in fact, that it was sometimes difficult to decide which topics should be in which chapter. As an example, should phonemic awareness be in the chapter on word study or reading? One could make an argument for both. Therefore, if you are looking for a specific topic, check the contents or index. Otherwise, you might decide to work through the discussion questions one chapter at a time.

You'll notice that the heading for this section refers to pedagogy and not curriculum. The difference between the two? Curriculum is *what* is being taught and pedagogy refers to *how*. Although curriculum is an important part of the conversation, the discussion should most often focus on pedagogy: *how* we are teaching the curriculum to maximize student learning.

Using Common Language

Now that I am no longer working for one school division, schools often hire me as a writer-in-residence. One of the most effective outcomes of this experience is building common language for all students and teachers within the school. This is also something you will accomplish through regular staff meeting discussions about pedagogy. Common language is powerful when we, as a staff, are discussing our vision, our goals, and our practice. Common language in the classroom can also propel our students' learning forward as they move from grade to grade.

The language-arts curriculum is known as a spiral curriculum: a concept is revisited repeatedly from year to year, with complexity increasing and student understanding deepening. In essence, we are building on what we have learned in previous years, rather than introducing new content and concepts each year. Using common language, then, helps students see the connections in what they are being taught, rather than leaving them feeling like teachers are continually introducing new concepts.

(Re)Considering School-wide Practices

Sometimes when we develop a common understanding, common goals, and common language with our teachers, we decide to establish school-wide literacy practices. If well thought-out, school-wide practices can improve both the practice of our teachers and the learning for our students. However, we must be cautious about becoming overzealous and implementing something just for the sake of implementation.

Let's consider a few examples. Many schools implement a school-wide period of time for independent reading: fifteen minutes each day when everyone is reading, for example. In *Sometimes Reading is Hard*, Robin Bright (2021) suggests,

Fifteen minutes is magic!... Carving out 15 minutes a day can make all the difference. That length of time is considered consequential in helping students improve their decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension reading skills. And it's so easy to make this a part of your daily routine. (85)

A few considerations: What time of day is best for most classrooms? How will we ensure students are actually engaged in reading? What should students be reading at this time? What are teachers doing during independent reading? (These questions will be addressed in Chapter 6.)

In *The Book Whisperer*, Donalyn Miller (2009) says, "The question can no longer be 'How can we make time for independent reading?' The question must be 'How can we not?'" (51)

As a school-wide practice, my preference is to begin the day with independent reading. In some schools with a morning broadcast or announcements, I have noticed a surprising amount of wasted instructional time, as nothing consequential occurs in the classroom until those announcements begin. And yet, let's think about how purposeful this time could be. Take those 15 minutes and multiply them by 5 days in a week: 75 minutes a week! Let's assume a 40-week school year: 75 minutes multiplied by 40 equals 3000 minutes. That's 50 hours of reading or instruction that our students are missing out on! If we establish the first 15 minutes of class as independent reading time—and we ensure that announcements or broadcast occur consistently at the same time each day—this instructional time becomes purposeful, rather than time spent waiting.

Let's consider another example of a school-wide practice: An elementary school implemented school-wide, multi-grade literacy groupings for 90 minutes every morning (three 30-minute blocks). All available staff were used to work with students in small groups. Students moved from adult to adult during those three blocks of time to work on different skills and strategies; teachers, then, did not always work with their own students. Although this plan was well-intentioned, many teachers said they did not feel the time was as valuable as it could have been. For one thing, they were not able to plan as well for these groupings as they could for their own class. Other teachers said that the time spent transitioning in and out of the groupings was neither efficient nor productive, often leaving three 20- or 25-minute blocks rather than using all 30 minutes with each group. So, although the intention of the admin team was commendable (and the planning considerable), many of the teachers resented this practice and felt that it was infringing on the quality instructional time they had with their own students.

If you are thinking about implementing a school-wide practice, or if there is currently a school-wide practice in place, consider these questions:

- What is the desired outcome?
- Will this practice use instructional time effectively?
- Is time used efficiently or is a lot of time spent in transitions? Is it an easy-to-implement practice?
- Will this practice improve student learning?
- When will we schedule time to talk about this practice as a staff to hear how it is working or not working?
- How might you generate excitement and a buy-in from your staff?

Building Capacity

Think of one or two school leaders you admire. Are those individuals confident about their own impact? Are they comfortable not always being the smartest in the room? Do they strive to empower others?

I once read that the best leaders are people who feel great about themselves. I have given this statement a lot of thought and considered it in regard to the leaders I have worked with. Perhaps it holds some truth. The most effective leaders I know are those who understand that they aren't necessarily the smartest in the room, who don't try to do everything themselves, who know the value of team, and who build others up while capitalizing on their unique gifts. If you are a secondary-trained principal leading an elementary school, this is confirmation that you can be an effective administrator in this environment even though you might feel out of your comfort zone.

The fact that you're reading this book shows a willingness to learn and improve. As you consider how to proceed with literacy goals within your school, think carefully about how you can build capacity and empower your staff, capitalizing on the strengths of your team to create the biggest impact.

Becoming Literacy Leaders in Our Schools

"Be silly. Be honest. Be kind." — Ralph Waldo Emerson

"You're off to great places! Today is your day! Your mountain is waiting, so... get on your way!" — Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*

"Wear your reading love proudly in front of your students every day. The reality is that you cannot inspire others to do what you are not inspired to do yourself." (Miller 2009, 118)

One of the unofficial goals in most elementary schools is to inspire a love of reading. What students see around them should promote a love of reading, invite students to read, and demonstrate how the adults in the school are readers too! Are there nooks with books throughout your school? Are the books within your students' reach? Are there books on display with the covers visible (not only the spines)? Do the book displays change regularly? Are there child-friendly quotes around the building? Bulletin boards to show favorite books of staff members? The physical environment within a school speaks volumes. What do you want your space to say?

The most effective literacy teachers are those who value reading and ensure they are reading what their students are reading. These teachers can easily recommend books to their students and engage in meaningful conversations. And yet this is something administrators don't often think to do. Imagine the immediate connection you could make with a class if you asked them for a book recommendation, borrowed the book, and then returned the following week to share your reaction. Students who hadn't yet read the book would be much more likely to pick it up, knowing that their principal had read it too! Do you have young children or grandchildren in your life? Visit your primary classes and ask students for recommendations. They will be thrilled to tell you about their favorite books. The best part? This excitement is contagious. Students who haven't had much exposure to books at home, or students whose feelings about books have been primarily ones of frustration, in time may be influenced by the interest you show and by these positive associations with books.

Do you give out birthday pencils or certificates to the students in your school? Is there any way you could give books instead? I know of many schools who have creatively found the funds to purchase a wide variety of books; on their birthdays, students choose from this selection. I have witnessed many students skipping down the hall with a new book of their own—a gift of literacy in more ways than one!

The bottom line: don't leave it to your teachers to be the only literacy leaders in your school. How can you become a literacy leader for students too?

Finding the Funds

As principal, one of the challenges you face continually is budget. Whether we realize it or not, financial decisions are revealing and reflect what is valued within a school. If you believe strongly in the importance of literacy within your building, do your financial decisions demonstrate this? Are you committed to purchasing the resources needed to support your school goals? Have you allocated some of your budget to pay for a librarian or teacher librarian, even on a part-time basis? Have you set aside funds to support literacy school-wide, such as creating an environment to promote a love of reading?

Financial decisions that support literacy demonstrate what you value: to students, to staff, to parents. Money talks.

When budgets are especially tight, get creative. Pursue additional funding through grant applications. Be open to book donations (perhaps from a more affluent school or from the public library that might be culling). Consider: Are the book donations suitable for your library or could they be donated to families in need? In what ways can your school council support your literacy goals?

Instructional Walk Considerations: A Shared Literacy Vision

On your next instructional walk, consider:

- What do you notice about the physical environment of your school? Does it reflect the importance of literacy and promote a love of reading?
- Look at your school through the eyes of a student. What might they notice to help them understand that literacy is valued in their school?
- What might you do to improve the physical space to ensure that it reflects your core beliefs and your school goals?
- Are school-wide interruptions (announcements, phone calls to the classroom, pages for the principal to come to the office) kept to a minimum to protect instructional time? How can you ensure that communication does not negatively affect learning and teaching?
- What are the strengths of the teachers within your school?
- Is there a school-wide practice already in place within your school? If so, does it seem to be effective? Does it honor instructional time?
- What are your students reading? What books do they recommend to you?
- How might you facilitate the sharing of student book recommendations with other students in the school? On a school-wide bulletin board? Through a book talk during broadcast?

Talk Time: A Shared Literacy Vision

Take some time to read and think about this quotation and these questions before discussing them with your colleagues.

In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey (2004) said, "To begin with the end in mind means to start with a clear understanding of your destination. It means to know where you're going so that you better understand where you are now and so that the steps you take are always in the right direction." (98)

- How does this quote apply to your work with students?
- What are your goals for your students this year? (Prioritize 3 or 4 at most.)
- What do you plan to do to reach these goals? Be specific.
- Which of your goals might be appropriate to consider as part of our school goals? Is there a way we can work toward one of these goals collectively as a staff?

Other questions for discussion:

- Think about your classroom environment. Does it reflect your own personal goals for the year or your school-wide literacy goal(s)? Is there anything you might add or change?
- What do you suggest we do to our school environment to better reflect our literacy goals?

