

Can Teachers Lead Change from the Classroom?

Leadership in schools can come from a large number of sources, from the principal and leadership team to the system, but can it come from teachers in the classroom? If teachers are expected to engage in more professional learning, with current fiscal restraints, then schools will need teachers with knowledge, skills and expertise to lead.

In this edition of Perspectives, Professor Mike Gaffney, Ms Louise Corrigan and Ms Lauren Sayer will provide their perspective on “**Can teachers lead from the classroom?**”

The difference you make, the influence you have, can vary from one class to another, from one meeting to the next, and from day to day.

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As a teacher, have you ever asked yourself what difference you make to your students and to the people that you work with? If you have, then you realise that this is not a straightforward question. Your answer depends on many factors. The difference you make, the influence you have, can vary from one class to another, from one meeting to the next, and from day to day.

One definition of educational leadership is *making a positive and meaningful difference to lives and learning of others*. In other words, leaders are known by their deeds and impacts rather by their positional authority in an organisational hierarchy. From this perspective, teachers ‘lead’ when they *make a difference* to their students, to their colleagues, to other members of their school community, and to their professional associations and networks.

But what differences do leaders actually make? What changes do they bring about? The literature on educational change encompasses many different meanings and perspectives - from influencing others to alter their mindsets and behaviours to reforming school structures and processes and improving performance.

Can teachers lead change from the classroom? This is a deceptively complex question. Not only does it involve coming to terms with the concepts of *leadership* and *change*, but also asking the question about whether teachers can be *agents* of change - rather than the *targets* of change. So to address this complexity, and in the interests of providing a comprehensive and balanced critique, I am going to give three answers. First . . .

Yes, of course they can!

Teachers lead every day. Sometimes they recognise it as their students excitedly engage in classroom activity! Sometimes they realise it thirty years later at a class reunion when a former student comes up and says ‘thank you’. After all, the student-teacher interaction and relationship is the core of schooling. Educational change means nothing unless it has a beneficial impact on those relationships and interactions.

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One practical way in which teachers can lead from the classroom is through supporting the development of their teaching colleagues. Mentoring, coaching, peer review and the like can be powerful means by which teachers can exercise leadership as well as receive timely, informed and practical support. An example is the **National Mentoring for Science and Mathematics Teachers** project. This initiative is designed to improve the quality of science and mathematics teaching by providing quality mentoring and developing the pedagogical and content knowledge and practice of science and maths teachers. Throughout Australia, experienced classroom based mentors are supporting mentees within and beyond their schools. The mentees are either in the early stages of their teaching career or are teaching science and maths with limited disciplinary background knowledge. The mentors are working to develop the knowledge and practice of their less experienced colleagues. The mentor-mentee pairings are supported by a combination of research and development agencies and professional associations. Together these agencies and participants constitute a powerful collaborative network which is focussed on the practice and development of classroom-based teacher leadership to tackle an issue of national significance, i.e. the engagement and achievement of students in mathematics and science.

Yet initiatives such as this and the practice of teachers supporting the development of their peers are not as widespread as they could be. Why? Perhaps there is an alternative response to the question about teachers leading change . . .

No way, are you kidding!

How can teachers *lead change from the classroom* when they are so stretched with the needs and demands of their students and their families, and swamped with meetings and paperwork? With their typically frenetic school day combining roles of the social worker, nurse, marriage counsellor, security guard, cleaner – and yes, even as teacher, how can they possibly find time to lead anything? In fact rather than focussing on questions about teacher leadership, maybe the more pressing issue is how we retain talented and committed people in the profession. Recent Australian and international research reports describe the prevalence and ways of addressing this

problem. Even if we can devise strategies to overcome the problems of staff turnover, develop more teacher-friendly induction practices and work environments, and create space for teacher leadership, the next question is . . .

Can teachers be trusted to lead?

Unfortunately my experience of schools and educational systems is that too many executive staff and bureaucrats hold the view that teachers themselves are the problem, and therefore should be the target of change rather than the agents of it. They use headline catch phrases from international research like ‘the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers’ to beat teachers over the head. Then they proceed to devise ways of *getting teachers to change* through ‘policy drivers’ such professional standards, centralised curriculum and assessment, and systemic, national and international comparative reporting of student achievement.

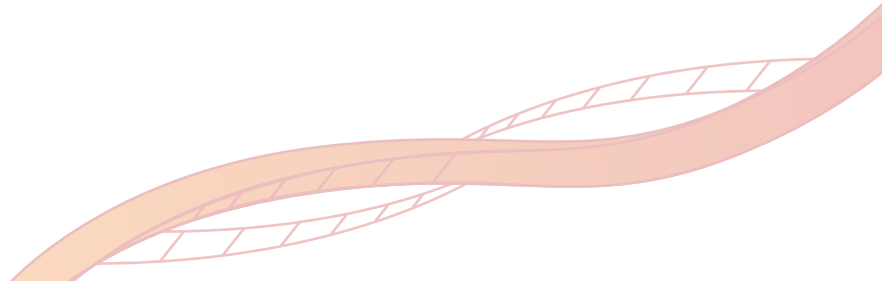
In short, we have to overcome not only individual teacher work pressure and reluctance but also systemic inertia and centralised mindsets if we are to more fully embrace the opportunities of classroom-based teacher leadership.

Definitely maybe!

So where do we go from here? My point is that we need to find a way of combining effective localised professionally networked initiatives with good systemic policy, i.e. where ‘bottom-up’ and top down perspectives come together and create something fresh and innovative.

The **Ontario Teacher Learning and Leadership Program** is an interesting example of how the work of teachers leading change from the classroom might be integrated with systemic priorities and imperatives. The program is a partnership between government and unions in which teachers design and lead projects designed to address local needs and ‘facilitate knowledge exchange for the spread and sustainability of effective and innovative practices’. Teacher participants are supported in developing their leadership skills along the way.

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Another example is the work of teacherpreneurs, described by their sponsoring agency - the **Center for Quality Teaching**, an American not-for-profit agency as 'expert teachers whose workweeks are divided between teaching students and designing systems-level solutions for public education'. These teachers are undertaking hybrid roles, or as Mr Spock might reply to Captain Kirk, 'they're teachers Jim - but not as we know them'.

Still further out in the galaxy are initiatives in teacher leadership that do not use the term 'classroom' at all, instead referring to an *expanding learning ecosystem* in which new roles are emerging. The KnowledgeWorks Foundation in their latest report Exploring the Future Education Workforce include *learning pathway designers, competency trackers, pop-up reality producers, social innovation portfolio directors, learning naturalists, micro-credential analysts and data stewards* as the new frontiers for teacher employment – phew!

Regardless of where you are in the schooling universe, the message is the same. Teachers can and should lead change but they cannot do it by themselves. Working with colleagues, school executive, community members, and central administrators in reciprocal respectful relationships is essential.

Finally, each of us approach leadership and change as personal phenomena. Our beliefs are vital for our agency. As Gandhi advised, *be the change you want to see*. Similarly, the baby boomers among us might recall the lyrics of Beatle George Harrison:

*Try to realise it's all within yourself,
no-one else can make you change*

As a teacher, be the leader you want to be, think about the differences you wish to make and go out and make them happen – from the classroom or from anywhere else your career takes you. And remember, you are not alone!

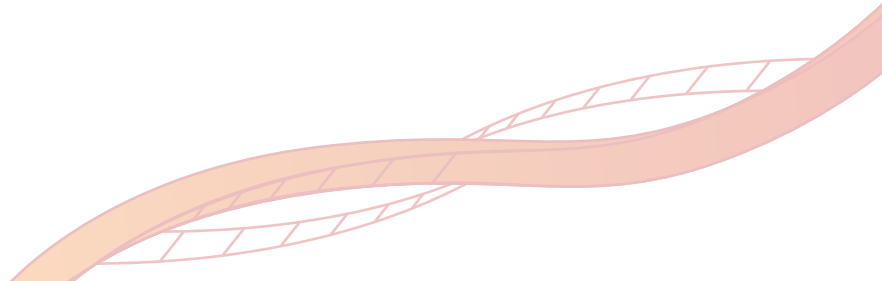


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**Can Teachers Lead Change from
the Classroom?**

Join ACEL Members in this discussion.



Teachers have been a focal point in the discussions and research about what or who impacts on student learning most...

Perspectives

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Leading change in schools and education happens in many ways and we often hear about the big reforms from policy makers. Teachers have been a focal point in the discussions and research about what or who impacts on student learning most. It is my view, teachers lead change from the classroom as exceptional practitioners and mentors, as researchers and innovators and as influencers. It is imperative for systems of learning that teachers play a pivotal role in educational change. Reflecting on my early years as a teacher, to spending time in Reggio Emilia, to now as a school leader in the Northern Territory I am going to explore the different types of leadership teachers take on, to make changes in their educational settings.

Like many early career teachers I set out to make a real difference to children. My beliefs were that all children could be successful learners no matter their geographical location or diversity of background. Passion flowed and it didn't matter where I taught, I was set to make a difference. My great start to teaching was partly due to having the most extraordinary mentor. She was a teacher at the end of her career and had been (and still is), an understated icon of her community. She loved teaching and any child that had the great fortune of being in her class benefited beyond educational outcomes, although children under her guidance also achieved beyond expectations. She valued who children were and engaged them in learning, leading to great success. She set high expectations and was relentless in the pursuit of this. Teaching was never just her job it was her vocation. Even now, retired for over a decade she continues to inspire through advocating for those she believes in whole heartedly.

Teachers who are good at what they do are exceptional practitioners and mentors, they cannot and often don't keep their knowledge tacit. They lead in their communities in many ways, driven by their passions and their personal responsibility to make a difference. They execute their craft not to be the best or for recognition but because of their belief and desire to see others succeed.

As an Early Years Educator it was not just a dream to visit Reggio Emilia, it was a necessity for me to deeply understand early years education and the difference it can make to communities. To experience how it is steeped in innovation, research, design, aesthetics and human connectedness. Reggio Emilia was my educational wonderland. I did not find the silver bullet to education, which perhaps at the time I was expecting to do. What I found was a great love for being a teacher, for the profession and for what we contribute to the world. The essence of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia-Istituzione Preschools and Infant-Toddler Centres is what Loris Malaguzzi called an "education based on relationships" (Edwards & Rinaldi, 2009). Familiar isn't it? This place captivated me with its deep belief and culture that teachers are intelligent researchers and integral to the prosperity of their community. This was felt and seen across all facets of my experience there. For me teachers as researchers was the most engaging. Regardless of their career stage, teachers engaged in high level research about their practice. All teachers were committed to looking at their practice or children by hypothesising, carrying out research and presenting findings to colleagues and international educators. Connections to universities and other industries were strong.

Teachers as researchers engage in and document change. They assess, evaluate and continue to seek what is best practice and what makes a difference to student learning. Teachers who use their understanding to seek new innovations and test to see if it makes a difference, are leading their profession. This work encourages continuous change and ensures that we continue to be intelligent researchers and integral to the prosperity of our communities.

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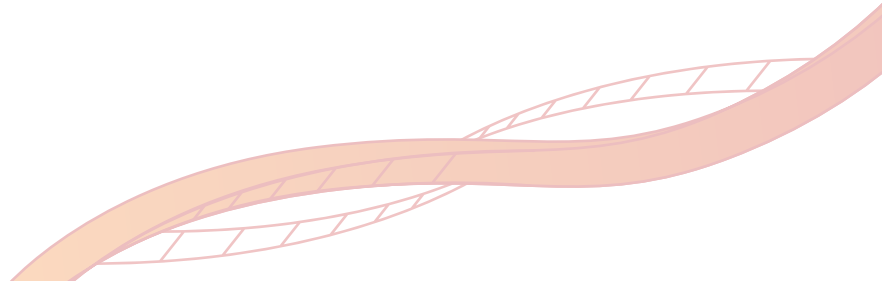
Now, as a school leader, I see that change is led through others. We wondered at our school, 'what if we worked a bit like the organisation IDEO?' What would happen if we offered our teachers opportunities to lead teams to improve students learning? We knew that collaboration has a significant effect size, we knew that distributing AND supporting leadership in teachers creates success. Like many schools we established Professional Learning Communities and ensured team leaders were supported through professional development and coaching. We restructured timetables and allocated time to set the conditions for success. To be honest we were quietly confident that this would work quickly and we would reap the benefits early. This did not happen. As a leader it was confusing and frustrating. It wasn't until we took a step back from the work and really listened to our teachers that change happened, not only the way we envisaged but with better innovations and results. Our teachers took a risk and 'managed up'. They influenced what we thought and brought their own innovations to Professional Learning Communities in our school.

Teachers who are risk takers and are not afraid to influence up when it counts, are needed for educational change. Our teachers not only taught us how to establish PLCs more effectively, they taught us about change. It can be difficult for teachers to take on influential roles but it is required to ensure changes happen for the improvement of children's learning.

These are just three vignettes from one educator. I know there are many stories like these that exemplify how teachers are leading change in education every day. Knowing across our profession there are many teachers leading change from the classroom, I would like to set us a challenge as leaders in education: that we embrace teacher leadership beyond our aspirants to all teacher leaders no matter their stage of career or position. How do we connect and scale up the work of teachers as mentors, researchers and influencers to ensure every child is rewarded with a passionate, intelligent, risk taking teacher whose vocation is to make a real difference?

References

Edwards, C. & Rinaldi, C. (2009). *The Diary of Laura*. St Paul, MN USA: Redleaf Press.



Teacher's lead change every day... not just educational change but social change.

Perspectives

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Teachers lead change every day from the classroom and it is not just educational change, it is social change. I became a teacher because I love learning and I believe that education is the one thing we can provide that improves outcomes for all.

Teachers first and foremost lead change with students but I believe we are seeing classroom teachers are increasingly leading incredible change across the profession from their classroom thanks to social media. Traditional school models of leadership required teachers to lead teams within their school and then branch out to wider school networks thus developing leadership roles. Being an early adopter of change can be hard and influencing change when people are not ready can be even harder. Add to this a lack of formal leadership position and leading change from the classroom can seem a daunting and near impossible task.

Through changes in the way we communicate we now see teachers leading educational change across the globe from their classroom. They are creating processes of innovation through the use of disruptive technologies. Teachers who are having difficulty finding time in a hectic in-school professional learning schedule to show a new strategy at an afterschool meeting can now share such ideas as part of weekly twitter chats or in person at teachmeets across Australia. Where and how classroom teachers influence and lead is rapidly changing and just as classroom hierarchies are becoming flat for students, so is hierarchy in educational leadership opportunities.

With disruptive technologies storming the classrooms, social media has been among the most influential. The voice of the and for the classroom teacher, it has delivered a platform for self-expression; what's more, teachers are creating active communities centred on interests and resources, and augmented tools such as twitter and Instagram are heralding a new era of digital influence.

This new internationally-connected teacher has given rise to a not-so-quiet educational leadership revolution. Perhaps more

importantly, teachers have been given the gift of global feedback and an opportunity to listen and engage in debates that previously only principal and system leaders took part in. Social media represents the great bridging of teachers and formally-recognised school leaders.

Social media is impacting teacher and leadership behaviour and it is forcing schools to adapt. Social media is transformative because it changes the way the teacher leader communicates and connects. All children have a right to an education and, as a teacher, I embrace my own role as a learner. It is not just students who need to be connected globally; to flourish, we as teacher leaders, also need these connections.

I have not had a single day in my teaching career where I have not learned something that adds to my practice. Social media has allowed me to **'find my tribe'** of like-minded educators, and to galvanise a movement of educational change, even when my fellow classroom teacher might not be ready to begin. I have learned that the teaching profession is extremely generous. I have yet to be disappointed when I have reached out for support, mentorship or ideas; social media has allowed this to happen at a much faster rate, with a much broader audience, than I could ever have imagined.

Educational leadership is all about people not processes. I encourage everyone who wants to lead to broaden their outlook from *their* classroom and *their* school to *any* classroom, *any* teacher and *any* school, as this will surely ensure that children everywhere can benefit from the great teachers we have in Australia. I encourage leaders at all stages of their career to get involved in the conversations happening online through twitter chats and in person via teachmeets. I will continue to surround myself with people who see the value in learning and who practise what they preach. As a broader educational leadership community, let's continue to look for every opportunity to give students a sense of wonder and achievement in their education, every day.