

## Stepping Outside the Four Walls of My Classroom: Stepping Outside of Myself and My Unwarranted Labels



I recently made the transition from being a teacher to a school administrator. Many would call this move “leaving the classroom;” however, I like to think that I stepped out of my classroom long before I got this new role. For me, I “left the classroom” the moment I realized I was only as good as the team that I was a part of. When you begin to be concerned about the growth, development, and success of students and staff members outside of your four walls, you have mentally shifted the focus off just your classroom.

Unfortunately, I didn’t always have this mindset. Like many teachers, I spent my first few years on my own island, locked in my own classroom, only concerned about my survival and the experience of my students. When the waters got shaky, I spent a lot of energy trying to save myself instead of seeking the help of those around me. In fact, I didn’t think those around me had much to offer (yikes). I was relatively successful based on student feedback, student test scores, and my administrator’s evaluation of my teaching, so it was difficult to convince myself that I needed to step outside of room 208 for anything. However, the turning point

came when I realized that even within my school, there were many inequities. I could give students the best experience in my classroom, but what happened after they left my class? How was my school ever going to be successful if all of the adults had a selfish perspective narrowly focused on their own classroom and practice?

These lingering questions inspired me to pursue forms of teacher leadership in order to have access to “fixing” teachers around me, so that all of our students could experience academic success, no matter what class and teacher they were assigned (yes, I am aware of how obnoxious and pompous this sounds, but stick with me). However, becoming a teacher leader and stepping outside of my classroom to reach others ultimately had quite the reverse effect; I began to have an identity crisis when my examination of others started to become more about *me* and *my role* in our dysfunctional relationships.

I now believe that if we are to truly become effective educators and school leaders we have to begin by examining our relationships in order to understand our ever-changing identity in this work.

Take a moment to think about your relationships with people at your school. Do you believe that these relationships impact your development as an educator and therefore your impact on students, or do you believe that you have sole control over your identity and development?

## EARLY ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT MY ROLE AS A TEACHER LEADER

I approached my formal teacher leadership role with a sense of urgency and a fix-it mentality. I selected the content for department meetings, set the agendas, and facilitated based on what I thought were the needs of the group. Two years into my journey to “fix” others, I still felt like I hadn’t accomplished much; I still felt like my department was stuck in a place where complacency and mediocrity were acceptable. I was frustrated and disappointed with the lack of movement and growth. I was frustrated because our students were still not receiving an equitable

education even within our department.

I went back and forth about whose fault it was that we were not making progress as a group in moving towards a place of authentic learning and inquiry. At times, I put all the pressure on myself as the facilitator and then later put the pressure back on the group. However, what is interesting is that I never thought of myself as a member of this group. In other words, I never saw myself responsible as a participating group member. It was either all of my responsibility as the leader or their responsibility as the group. This epiphany became the turning point in my inquiry. How could I ever expect to make true progress if I didn't even feel truly connected to the group? What were the barriers preventing us from truly connecting?

## THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS

Teaching is relational; you can't be successful in this craft unless you have positive relationships with your students and colleagues. However, simply having a relationship does not guarantee success, as the type of relationship is key. There are three types of positive working relationships that I have experienced as an educator: congenial, collegial, and collaborative. While each relationship type has offered me something positive and influenced who I am as a character in this work, not all have helped to sustain my love and commitment to the profession or helped me to grow as an educator.

Many of my relationships with colleagues over the years have started and somehow gotten stuck on the congenial surface level. We are able to chat about personal matters, vent when things are going wrong, celebrate life milestones together, and share a drink at happy hour on Fridays, but when it comes to developing and challenging one another in order to become better educators, we seem to lack the capacity or perhaps interest.

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While most of my relationships with colleagues are congenial, there are a few that have managed to move beyond the basic social interaction level into a place where we can share our experiences with instructional practices. For me, the collegial type of relationship is more heart-wrenching than the small talk relationships, because we are playing the middle ground and stuck in the “land of nice.” Yes, we are actually talking about what matters most, our teaching, but we are not having a real conversation. In the “land of nice,” we share things about our teaching, with the purpose of *providing* information, not *seeking* information or feedback.

I struggled to get unstuck from the mud in the “land of nice,” because my prodding might have been perceived as an attack instead of an invitation to inquire into practice. So instead of being misunderstood and disrupting the comfortable nice atmosphere, I just nodded my head and moved on. As a result, I was always left alone to think about the places I wish I would have taken the conversation and the potential for relationships. I was often upset with my cowardice in these situations, especially because I knew that asking one thoughtful question could positively influence a student’s experience in a class and similarly, not asking that question could have the adverse effect.

After taking stock of my own relationships, I realized that I wanted something for everyone else that I had not experienced myself. I wanted authentic collaborative relationships. It was during this time that I began thinking about the dynamics of well functioning and effective working relationships. The elements that came up over and over again were: respect, trust, risk-taking, vulnerability, the capacity to get better, and a desire to grow.

How could I ever expect to make true progress within the group if I didn’t even feel truly connected to anyone in the group? The new lingering question became why did I not feel connected to them if I genuinely liked them as people?

While discussing my inquiry with fellow KSTF PING (Practitioner Inquiry for the Next Generation<sup>1</sup>) members, I realized some painful truths about my perception of my colleagues. I really didn’t see them as learners, and I didn’t value them intellectually. This was a shocking and shameful realization because it was the antithesis of how I approached working with my students. Instead of being patient

and contributing to their development, I was unknowingly judgmental, and this prevented me from truly connecting and collaborating for the common good of our school community.

How could I ever develop an authentic learning space with people that I didn't believe had anything to offer me, and why did I feel this way is the first place? Who did I think that I was?

## LESS ABOUT THEM, MORE ABOUT ME

In order to answer this question, I had to unpeel layers of my own identity and engage in some self reflection. How did others perceive me? How did I perceive myself? Where were the intersections of these perceptions?

Being labeled as a teacher leader brought along many perceptions and misconceptions that unknowingly became a part of my daily existence as a teacher. The mere fact that an administrator put me in the position implied that I had something other teachers in my department didn't, that perhaps on a spectrum of being "all set" to "needing to be fixed the most," I felt much closer to being "all set." Sure, I had my issues, but those were relative when compared to my colleagues', right?

I wanted to explore the possibilities that existed outside of the lines that my colleagues and I had placed around each other. What would it take to flatten the hierarchies that existed in our school community? What could be accomplished if every educator felt empowered?

While I have not found an answer to all of the questions I have posed, I have begun to discover more about myself and the power of collective ownership of student learning through one relationship with a colleague.

## A PROMISING RELATIONSHIP

Chris<sup>2</sup> and I began teaching the same year and our relationship started, as most of my colleague relationships do, with small talk, and it eventually progressed to the next level when we joined the same grade level team. I don't remember when or how it exactly happened, but at some point I realized that I felt comfortable being my complete, unfiltered self around him. I remember thinking, "...wow I can actually share my true feelings, struggles, and questions with him without feeling



judged, and in addition, I actually believed that he has something to offer me in return.”

Although I don’t remember the details of this transition in our work relationship, I know that I only felt comfortable after Chris began to show me how “real” he was. Real in the sense that although he was lauded as a great teacher among students and other colleagues, he was OK with showing me his vulnerable side by asking me questions and asking for my input on solving problems related to his practice. Although we taught in different content areas, he was the one colleague I approached whenever I needed a thinking partner about classroom management or learning activities I wanted to try. He pushed my thinking and challenged me to grow in ways that I never thought possible. He forced me to re-define professionalism and professional relationships. We have grown as teachers, leaders, and as true friends because of the collaborative nature of our relationship. We trust each other to be real, take risks, ask for help, but most of all to learn and inquire into our practices together for the betterment of our students.

The progression of this relationship gives me hope for how other relationships have the potential to become more collaborative. However, what I have learned most from the relationship I have with Chris is that it takes one person to be brave and show their vulnerabilities. Typically, I am the person that needs to see this quality first in someone before I offer the same in return. This need makes me wonder how many of my colleagues are waiting on me to be brave. How many relationships have I kept stuck because of this need?

The bigger issue that spans far beyond my story and journey is that we can’t afford to have students fall through the cracks because we won’t talk to each other about the real issues in our practice that affect student learning.

## BE BRAVE!

I have to learn to be brave, not because I am the designated leader in a group, but because I desire more from my work relationships in order to impact what is happening to the children we are all responsible for educating. I need to be brave for my students. I need to show more vulnerability for my students. I need to ask more probing questions for my students. I need to move relationships forward for the sake of my students... If for no one else, but my students.

What's your story? Who is waiting for you to be brave? Who needs you to step outside of your classroom?

The bigger issue that spans far beyond my story and journey is that we can't afford to have students fall through the cracks because we won't talk to each other about the real issues in our practice that affect student learning. We can't afford to have young people fall through the cracks because we are only selfishly concerned about what happens in our own classrooms. It takes one brave person to step outside their classroom. It takes one brave person in a relationship to push it to the next level. Will it be you?

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