
Foreword

Several years ago, I introduced a new course into our leadership preparation program titled Leading the Learner Centered School. The content was predicated on the notion that teachers' primary focus is on learners and learning. In my view, a deep understanding of that precept would assist aspiring school leaders to become more effective instructional leaders. A major assignment for students in this class was to partner with a learner of any age and spend the semester teaching each other about learning. The assignment culminated with a *learning fair* where each member of the class demonstrated the insights gained from the assigned consultation. I have fond memories of a music teacher bringing his partners—a quartet of sophomores who had taught him how capable they were at self-organizing—to compose unique music. Their performance in our class was a unique culmination to our busy semester. Some students invited teaching partners and shared an action research process related to instructional decisions. Not everyone *displayed* live partners, but each demonstration paralleled the remarkable findings of the book you find in your hands—when individuals spend time together talking about learning, instruction changes, learners engage, and achievement improves. That is the core message of Jo and Joe Blase in *Teachers Bringing Out the Best in Teachers*.

This book ought to be required reading for every aspiring and practicing principal because it truly represents an enlightened conversation about instructional leadership. In this age of NCLB (No Child Left Behind), educational administrators at all levels of schooling are charged with being instructional leaders, yet the actual implementation of that concept remains a pretty contested notion. Some school administrators lead instruction through close supervision of highly prescribed classroom behaviors. Others lead by joining the "Idea of the Month Club," overwhelming teachers with new approaches, new resources, and countless projects. Still others spend precious dollars on *gurus* who offer the latest fix for raising test scores. Study after study reports minimal gains in achievement from any of these approaches.

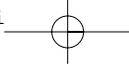
x Teachers Bringing Out the Best in Teachers

The treasure that Jo and Joe Blase offer to us in *Teachers Bringing Out the Best in Teachers* is that instructional leadership may be a far simpler concept than usually portrayed. This book is filled with voices of teachers who provide rich descriptions of their informal talk, detailing how a peer consultation process leads to improved instruction, better classroom management, and a deeper understanding of individual learners. As the authors note, "Teaching may be one of the few professions in which practitioners generously and passionately help colleagues and do this in spite of numerous barriers" (Chapter 5, p. 81). Principals have the power to remove the barriers, either structural, organizational, or human. If we listen carefully to and reflect on the words of these peer consultants in our midst, the role of an instructional leader becomes crystal clear. Effective instructional leaders do one thing: organize an environment that supports teacher conversation about learning.

The Blases' research makes visible the link between research-based knowledge and craft knowledge. Frequently, educators are cognizant of the research that touts positive learning outcomes of an innovative instructional approach. However, the actual implementation of the practice, the day-to-day organizing actions, may not be revealed in the research. Adult learners expect to master an idea very quickly; and if the experience of a new approach is messy for too long, they will give up on the practice despite research findings. The teacher voices in this book provide vivid descriptions of critical analyses and reflective work about daily practice in efforts to master new approaches. As they consult with peers, their craft knowledge clearly supports the adult *learning curve*.

This book challenges one other long-held assumption about teaching: that it is an isolated task. As I read the words of the many teachers in this study, I realized that despite the deep isolation of our organizational structures, teachers find multiple points of contact that break the isolation to hone their craft. In many cases, their informal talk fosters awareness of how easily classrooms become teacher centered rather than learner centered. One study participant noted how "self-examination made me realize that. The student's needs should come first" (Chapter 3, p. 56).

Clearly, I appreciate this new work by authors who have committed their professional lives to improving the experience of educating in our schools. I also am aware that many school leaders, who are committed to improving instruction, still struggle with the *how* of the work and resort to formal supervision and evaluation as a primary tool. This book provides more than a roadmap for the work of an instructional leader; the book itself is the journey. I encourage principals and teachers to use this book as a vehicle to foster faculty learning about learning. Each chapter contains powerful questions and implications for practice, as well as additional references that extend the topics. The most effective instructional leadership comes from principals who recognize and legitimize the natural tendency



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among educators to collaborate about learning. Used in this manner, school leaders may locate a new set of voices with rich data that will only improve our learner outcomes.

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