Teachers as Teacher Advisors: The Delicacy of Collegial Leadership

As they observed their own emerging relationships with teachers, Marin County teacher advisors discovered the dilemma posed by leadership among peers.

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Among the potentially most useful yet most demanding interactions among teachers are those that focus on actual classroom performance. Such interactions enable teachers to learn from and with one another, and to reflect on crucial aspects of curriculum and instruction. However, they also place teachers' self-esteem and professional respect on the line, because they expose how teachers teach, how they think about teaching, and how they plan for teaching to the scrutiny of peers. The challenge is to devote close, even fierce, attention to teaching while preserving the integrity of teachers.

A highly regarded Teacher Advisor Project at the Marin County Office of Education (California) presented one opportunity to examine advisor-teacher interactions that are closely bound to observed classroom practice. Over a three-year period a cadre of experienced advisers learned not only to comment effectively on teaching but also to work reciprocally with teachers. The advisers came close to the classroom without coming close to the bone. Their direct involvement with teachers, comparable to roles envisioned for master and mentor teachers and to senior positions in career ladder plans, showed that the perspectives and skills of advising have broad utility.

The Skills of Advising Project

In a joint venture by the Far West Laboratory and the Marin County Teacher Advisor Project, teacher advisors, teachers, and researchers analyzed videotapes of advisor-teacher conferences based on classroom observation. Completed during the spring of 1984 by eight advisors in collaboration with fourteen teachers, the taped conferences were diverse in grade level and subject matter, but they had two crucial characteristics in common.

First, conferences were extraordinary events. Without exception, the participating teachers found the conferences stimulating, rewarding, even "an ego boost." From the point of view of the teachers, these conferences "worked," offering a professional opportunity that most would eagerly repeat.

Second, they were rare. Even in these schools where teacher advisors worked regularly, interactions that brought advisors close to teachers' thinking about teaching or to their classroom performance were infrequent. As recorded on their routine contact logs, most advisors' work occurred outside the classroom.

For advisors, as for master or mentor teachers, the acceptance, mutual respect, and close working relations that made advisors welcome in the classroom appeared hard won. The advisor role had neither the force of bureaucratic authority nor the weight of tradition behind it. Advisors could apply no formal sanction (for good or ill) and could wield little direct influence over teachers' future rewards or opportunities. Rather, advisors influenced teachers through informal interaction.

Drumming up business: Advisors and teachers shared the dilemma of getting started with one another. Teachers were quietly perplexed about how to proceed; some resented the hours advisors spent in the lounge (trying to drum up business) while teachers were hard at work in classrooms. Advisors' open-ended invitation to "use me" left teachers hesitant to propose anything that might cast the advisor in the role of "gofer" or aide. At the same time, advisors were hesitant to propose specific projects with teachers for fear of "stepping on toes." The result was a strange dance that transpired mostly in the teachers'
lounge, mostly at a polite distance, and rarely in the more intimate environs of the classroom.

To get past the teachers’ lounge, advisors recruited interested individuals on a case-by-case basis. Teachers who were interviewed felt that the first move was best made by the advisor, whose role in the school was unfamiliar and ambiguous. The advisor could make a pitch to teachers about work worth doing, but the advisor’s proposals had to be very specific: “This is what I’ve done before. This is what I could do for you.”

**Principles and practices of advising.**

The generally helpful stance that advisors took toward teachers, contributing in any way they could, combined with the well-designed group training sessions, which they conducted for teachers to earn them entry to teachers’ classrooms. Once there, the way advisors conducted themselves in discussions and conferences with teachers helped earn them the right to come again.

A close look at the videotaped conferences revealed six ways in which advisors and teachers successfully looked at teaching together. The six principles are presented from two points of view. First, they present the ways an advisor and teacher work together: conferences attain the greatest depth, vigor, and range as a joint

### Figure 1. Six Principles of Advising

#### The “technical” principles: talk about teaching

**Common Language**

Skillful pairs agree on the importance of a common language and make a deliberate move to use shared ideas and language to describe, understand and refine teaching.

Skillful advisors take the lead in conveying the importance of a shared language, locating and proposing key ideas and terms, teaching them to others, and using them appropriately and creatively in their own talk.

**Focus**

Skillful pairs focus on one or two key questions, issues, situations, or problems and addresses them with depth, persistence, imagination, and good humor.

Skillful advisors take the lead in making observations and conferences purposeful and focused: they propose a focus or invite teachers to propose one; they draw on outside study and research as well as on their own classroom experience to discuss the topic; they tie their notes and observation records tightly to the proposed focus; without being stilted mechanical or overly rigid, they stick to the focus during conferences. They make their talk concrete and precise.

**Hard Evidence**

Skillful pairs use a record of classroom interaction as a basis for generating questions, drawing conclusions, and pursuing alternatives. They work together to invent or select the observation methods that suit their purposes.

Skillful advisors convey the importance of an adequate record and do a thorough job of collecting the evidence, in and out of the classroom, that will make the discussion rigorous and fruitful.

**Interaction**

Skillful pairs engage in lively interaction with one another, making the conference a vehicle for joint work on teaching and an opportunity to improve their ability to learn from one another.

Skillful advisors foster interaction by the way they arrange the physical setting, the introduction they give in the first two minutes, and the manner in which they use questions throughout the discussion.

**Predictability**

Skillful pairs build trust in one another’s intentions by relying on a known, predictable set of topics, criteria, and methods.

Skillful advisors are as clear about the observation and conference criteria and methods as they expect the teacher to be about instructional aims and methods.

**Reciprocity**

Skillful pairs build trust by acknowledging and deferring to one another’s knowledge and skill, by talking to each other in ways that preserve individual dignity, and by giving their work together a full measure of energy, thought and attention.

Skillful advisors provide a model of reciprocity by showing their own willingness to improve, by showing serious attention to teachers’ knowledge and experience, and by working as hard to observe well as teachers are to teach.

Based on the Skills of Advising Study completed as a joint project of the Marin County Teacher Advisor Project and the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development.
achievement of a skillful pair accustomed to working together on teaching. Second, they present the way an advisor takes the lead to build the necessary shared understandings, habits, and skills (see Figure 1).

Do advisors give advice? There are no established traditions in the teaching profession by which teachers receive advice on their teaching, or offer advice to others. However skillfully and enthusiastically conducted, the conferences described here placed teachers on unfamiliar ground with one another. Advisors were hesitant to "set themselves up as expert." They only rarely gave direct advice in their face-to-face conferences with teachers. Three explanations seemed plausible to the advisors:

1. Knowledge. While secure in their general grasp of curriculum and pedagogy, advisors sometimes believed they knew too little to construct useful advice about a specific teacher's intentions and practices, the observed grade or subject, or a particular classroom situation.

2. Strategies. Advisors were reluctant to introduce their own ideas in ways that might undermine teachers' own analyses or ignore their aspirations. To elicit commentary from teachers, they concentrated on mastering techniques of careful description, active listening, and skillful questioning.

3. Etiquette. In their reticence to give advice, advisors were responding to the prevailing professional etiquette among teachers: advice is not highly prized. Offering advice, especially unsolicited advice, runs counter to the valued, accepted, collegial behavior of teachers. The etiquette surrounding advice-giving appears to be a familiar chord. The advisor role can be examined from three perspectives: (1) the advisor as a peer who models productive professional relations, offering assistance when asked; (2) the advisor as a staff developer or curriculum specialist who offers training and consulting on specific topics; (3) the advisor as a senior colleague whose demonstrated knowledge, skill, and energy warrant the rights to initiate and lead that go with the title of advisor. The first perspective was most consistent with descriptions offered by the advisors themselves, who stressed the "facilitative" aspects of their relations with teachers. The third perspective deserves our attention in light of the recent pressure to expand career leadership opportunities and rewards.

The idea of leadership roles for teachers was attractive to advisors and teachers alike. For both, however, "facilitating" teachers was more acceptable than leading them; facilitation respects colleagues as persons and professionals, and considers their humanity and their work. Facilitative advisors should be creative and diligent in their efforts to assist teachers, eagerly joining in their work without proposing what the work should be.

A more assertive stance appeared to raise the specter of heavyhandedness. Advisors worried that they would be seen as insensitive to teachers' preferences and blind to their talents; they feared that direct and assertive action would be interpreted as riding roughshod.

At issue was how advisors or master and mentor teachers, with the promises and claims implicit in these roles, could become leaders in the improvement of teaching. If selection as an "advisor" carried no special status or expert standing with teachers, the facilitator role necessarily would prevail: advisors would invite teachers to decide how and when to use their services; they would assist, respond, and give advice when asked.

To the extent that the teachers accepted the special status and expert standing of the advisors, however, advisors (and others in similar roles) probably would be able to propose ideas for joint work, argue topics or problems that deserve attention, raise tough questions, access more and less promising ideas straightforwardly, and offer to teach others what they knew.

These are not statements about the character or qualifications of individuals, but predictions about their actions based on the history of the profession and the organization of teaching in most schools. Facilitators are far more compatible with tradition than leaders in curriculum and instruction. In examining roles whose titles promise some professional leadership, we can reasonably ask: do their characteristic words and deeds lean more toward assertion and leadership or more toward facilitation and support?

Leadership or Facilitation? In light of contemporary pressures—and opportunities—to expand leadership roles in the teaching profession and in schools, we have pressed the leadership issue. Deliberately exaggerating the distinction between leadership and facilitation reveals the challenges and dilemmas that the advisor role poses. In practice, the lines will be less clear, the distinctions more subtle. As we follow new efforts to invest the teaching career with richer professional opportunities, rewards, and obligations, however, we will do well to keep the less subtle construction in mind. Central to any improvement-oriented initiative that rests heavily on joint work on teaching are the principles and skills of advising. At stake are substantial gains in professional support for learning to teach, and for the steady improvement of schools.

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