

Listening as Leadership

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I must follow the people. Am I not their leader?

—Benjamin Disraeli

I've been a teacher—of young children, of college students, of other teachers—for a dozen years now. I suppose I've always held an identity as a teacher. My parents were teachers; many of my parents' friends were teachers; many of my friends' parents were teachers. In sixth grade my best friend's first job was a paper delivery route; mine was as a math tutor for third-graders. So it's fair to say that an identity as a teacher is pretty deeply rooted in me.

But for years I resisted the idea of being a teacher leader. I remember saying to an employer once, "Oh, no no no, I'm not ready to be a head teacher!" It took quite a while for the concept of leadership, the idea of the role of a leader, to start to sit comfortably with me, and it's only in the last few years that I've started to take on the idea of teacher leadership as something that could apply to me.

A big part of the change has been an evolution in my view of what leadership even is. As I've developed in my role as a leader and built my understanding of what leadership means to me, I've found that my role vis-à-vis other teachers and colleagues has been informed by, and has grown out of, my practice teaching of young children. In particular, I've come to see teacher leadership as a process of active, intentional listening—a skill I've worked hard to develop in my years teaching young children. I view teacher leadership—or, at least, my particular entry into teacher leadership at this stage in my development as a teacher leader—as a set of listening behaviors. The more I look back at my time in preschool classrooms, the more I see

Schools: Studies in Education, vol. 13, no. 2 (Fall 2016).

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listening-based practices that parallel ways I've engaged in leadership with teachers and colleagues.

I purposefully construct the idea of *listening* quite broadly. To me, listening comprises a mind-set that values the ideas and perspectives of others, as well as actions that result from that mind-set. Thus, listening is not only the act of attending to the words someone else says in a conversation but also the act of intentionally creating an opportunity for that conversation. Listening is the assumption that the behaviors of another person (a colleague, a student) have as much to tell you as their words. Listening is making a choice to take action based on someone else's point of view. In this piece I will describe a wide range of approaches I have used with both adults and children that I argue are tied together by a listening mind-set. By drawing such a range of approaches together within this one frame, I find connections between disparate parts of my practice as an educator, and my frame for what it means for me to be a teacher leader can integrate into my larger identity as a teacher.

Teachers Who Listened

When I think of the teachers I've had who've influenced my teaching practice, I think of Pam Cooke in sixth grade who, on the first day of school, asked us what qualities a good teacher should have, and then actually tried to embody those qualities throughout the year. "Hey guys, I'm flexible," she'd often remind us. "You said it was important for me to be flexible, and I'm trying to be flexible!"

I think of Felicia Wong in a high school philosophy seminar, who taught by letting us debate ideas with each other and then pushing us to have higher-level conversations. I remember her sitting quietly for the first 20 minutes of class one day while we all talked back and forth, destroying an argument by Kant or Hume or someone, until finally she said something like, "Okay, sure, everything you've all said is correct. But you're smart enough to find the flaws in anyone's argument, and ultimately that's not all that interesting. How about you talk about what's good or interesting about this philosopher's idea, and see where that takes you?" I don't think she said another word for the rest of the period; she trusted us to move in the right direction, and we didn't let her down.

I think of Peter Schultz in a college geology class who took an absurd range of students, from freshman theater majors to senior geology majors, and made us all feel brilliant by taking our questions seriously and empowering us to research our own answers. "That's a great question!" he would invari-

ably respond to questions at every level. “In fact, top researchers have been looking into that. Here’s a relevant paper that was just published, why don’t you read it and tell us what you learned next class?”

What ties these teachers together, for me, is their deep commitment to listening to their students. Each of them showed true interest and value in what students had to say, what students thought. And for each of them, listening wasn’t just something they did because they were interested or because it made students feel better; rather, it was as though listening was their primary tool for teaching, like they didn’t know how to teach without pushing students to express their ideas. As I built a teaching practice of my own, I drew on their examples to try to put that attention to students, that listening, at the center of my work.

Learning to Listen to Children

When I look back on my teaching during my first few years, I now see a lot of it as a long process of learning to be someone who listens effectively to children.

To finish my master’s degree at San Francisco State University, I conducted an 18-month teacher research project (Fischer 2009) investigating my role in supporting learning through play in my classroom. I knew that play was important to learning and that a child-centered approach was how I wanted to teach, but I found that I didn’t have a framework for how to do it. I spent a year documenting my interactions with children at play, taking notes and transcribing audio recordings, looking for patterns in the results of my interventions in play. I ultimately arrived at a deceptively simple framework for supporting high-quality learning through play: my job was to attend to what the children were trying to accomplish in their play and then use the lowest-intervention strategy I could think of to help them accomplish their goals. In other words, to listen to the children and try to be helpful without meddling too much. I found that the more I inserted myself into children’s play, the more their learning was subverted by my well-intentioned involvement.

That’s not to say that the answer was a *laissez-faire* attitude; on the contrary, the best teaching I documented was when I stayed close to a game, quietly building an understanding of the children’s thinking and only occasionally offering a word or two of input. For instance, when a conflict during a pretend game of “sisters” was on the verge of tears, a one-sentence intervention of mine based on the children’s shared agenda (“You could all be twins!”) quickly put them on track for an extended session of conflict

resolution and flexible thinking. Another time a complicated pretend game was starting to peter out, and a child with a good idea couldn't get the attention of the group; when I simply called the children's attention to their friend ("Hey, I think Henry wants to tell you all something!"), the game was reinvigorated by my support for the children's ideas, and the learning continued.

Early in developing this approach, though, I made any number of missteps—always with the best of intentions, of course. During a happy game of "doctors and patients," for instance, I saw what I thought was an opportunity to learn about cooperation and taking care of each other, and I pushed the game on that direction. My intervention backfired: the game fell apart, everyone (the children and myself) felt frustrated and disappointed, and no one cooperated or took care of anyone. I had to learn that my attempts to control and direct children's play and learning not only failed to get the results I wanted most of the time, but it often ruined the productive thinking the children were engaged in before I meddled. Over time I learned that my best approach to play is to remain close by and attentive, building my understanding and waiting for moments when a little support would go a long way. In other words, the more I simply simply listen to the children, the more effective I am as their teacher.

Another major step in building my listening skills in the classroom came in my second year of teaching, when several preschool colleagues in San Francisco taught me a technique that I have successfully used with many of my biggest discipline challenges: contract writing. When faced with a child who resists all my usual strategies for managing children's behaviors, I'd find a quiet time to sit down with the child to create a plan together. "We've tried all my ideas, and they didn't work," I'd say. "We need some of your ideas." I would take the child's ideas seriously and write them down—and when they didn't work, we'd try again together, in an iterative process of talking and listening. As I wrote in my article on this approach:

The child can see that her teacher cares enough to listen to her ideas and to follow through on his promises. Her teacher is not upset with her. On the contrary, he is optimistic and trusting. When she sees that her teacher believes in this process, she'll invest in it too. Sharing power with the child takes work, but is a highly effective method of guidance. . . . When trying to solve a problem in the moment, both the child and teacher may be stressed out and can feel like adversaries. But when they make a plan together, they are on the same team, working together and committing to trusting each other. [This approach]

transforms an ineffective power struggle into an opportunity for mutual respect. (Green 2013)

By building this intentional practice of listening to children, my biggest discipline challenges not only resolved themselves but became some of my strongest relationships with students.

Learning to Listen to Teachers

Although I didn't necessarily see the connection at the time, while I was building listening practices with children in those early years, I was also beginning to see how important those practices could be with teachers. Early in my career as a teacher I remember being very conscious of the preschool teachers I wanted to emulate. In the year I spent substitute teaching, before teaching full-time, it was easy to spend the day in a great teacher's classroom picking up teaching tips. But when I taught in a classroom of my own I couldn't just glean practices from watching the teachers I admired; I had to walk up to them and ask for input. "Teacher Sue," I would ask, "could you help me figure out how to address this behavior?" "Amanda, can I run some curriculum ideas past you?" Working with such talented and generous staffs, I wasn't surprised that these teachers were happy to offer their input. What surprised me is when they asked for mine.

These teachers I admired didn't seek out my point of view because my rookie teaching practice was amazing, but because they knew something that I was only starting to figure out. Being a top-notch teacher doesn't mean always having great teaching ideas. Rather, it can be a process of finding great teaching ideas through connections with other teachers. Just as I had learned that I could be a great teacher in the classroom by listening to children during play, these teachers were showing me that being a good teacher meant listening to other teachers—asking for their ideas and paying attention to their approaches. These teachers talked about their classrooms with all the other teachers at school, as well as teachers elsewhere. For them, thinking about teaching was a social process, and they drew strength from others around them. They weren't threatened when other people had better ideas; on the contrary, they eagerly sought out others' ideas. The reason I knew so many terrific teachers was that they were all helping each other to be better, drawing power from one another, listening to their colleagues. I learned from their example to put energy into listening to my colleagues.

Some early listening practices I used were quite modest. For instance, one year my co-teacher Elva and I developed hand signals for things like, "I'm

concentrating on this child right now, I need you to cover the rest of the classroom for a few minutes.” We agreed never to doubt or second guess each other in the moment; when one of us said something, the other always listened. I know any number of teaching teams that struggle with discipline, but our classroom management that year was air-tight, because we built systems to quickly and continuously share and respond to each other’s points of view.

Years later I saw a preschool teacher use the same approach with a child who was having a tough time participating in class meetings. “When you see me touch my nose like this,” he told the child, “that will be our secret code that it’s okay for you to go read books if you want.” Noticing that a particular strategy for communicating could work equally well with children and with colleagues was an early hint for me that maybe a leadership role with teachers wasn’t such a stretch for me; maybe my teaching practice already gave me a lot of the tools I would need.

Another area of my practice with colleagues in which I incorporated listening early on was in curriculum planning. I quickly learned that curriculum planning is best accomplished collaboratively. I found that when I created a lesson plan on my own at home, I would generally think, “Yeah, I guess that’ll be fine,” and the next day at school the activity might or might not work. But when I created a lesson plan together with my teaching team, I’d often feel excited about the curriculum we created. We’d sit around a table after school, and an idea of mine would spark an idea for my colleague, which would remind another colleague of an activity she’d done the year before, which would in turn provide a new and better direction for my initial idea. Not only was I more excited by curriculum we created together, but that curriculum almost invariably was better received by the children than solo-built stuff. “What do you think?” became a question we constantly asked each other, knowing that responding to each other’s ideas made each of us better teachers.

The more I found ways to listen to colleagues, the more similarities I saw with practices I used to listen to children. Making a curriculum plan with other teachers felt remarkably similar to supporting children at play: both went best when I was able to allow other people’s ideas for learning be better than my own. Bringing a curriculum question to the table with my teammates felt a lot like writing a contract with a child: in both contexts I found myself saying, “We’ve tried all my ideas, and they didn’t work. I need your ideas now.” I was finding, as I built my experience as a teacher, that more I took myself out of the center of things, both with children and with colleagues, the more effective I was.

Creating Spaces for Listening to Children and Teachers

Early on in my teaching I learned that the question “What did you draw?” often makes children clam up, while the more open-ended “Tell me about your drawing” can release a torrent of thoughts. After a few years, I found that it can be even more effective to offer a specific comment. For instance, I might say to a child, “I’m interested in these yellow lines you made over here,” and although I didn’t actually ask the child to say or do anything, all of a sudden I am in the midst of a genuine conversation. “Those lines are the snakes.” “Snakes? Snakes are so interesting.” “They’re going to sleep in their snake hole.” “What made you think of snakes?” “We went to the zoo.” “Oh, I love the zoo! I like to look at the tigers.” “We saw the tigers too! Here, I’ll draw the tigers.” And so on. Conversations like this are effective because, without putting the child on the spot by making any particular demands on her, I open up a context in which the child feels welcome to share ideas, and she is reinforced not by my approval (e.g., “I like your drawing.”) but by my attention and understanding—which are ultimately about the child reinforcing herself.

As I gained seniority as a teacher, I began to see how a similar kind of listening was an effective and supportive part of my relationship with colleagues I supervised. In my first year as a head teacher, and again in my first year supervising a student teacher, I quickly found that giving direct criticism was usually a terrible strategy. No matter how gently I tried to phrase it, saying that a lesson plan wasn’t good enough was likely to create a feeling of resentment; at best, it put me in the position of deciding what a better plan would be, and it did nothing to help my assistant become a better teacher. On the other hand, helping my assistant debrief lesson plans afterward went quite well. I could simply ask, “How did your activity go today?” and she felt comfortable to reply, “Well, I liked it, but the kids didn’t stay involved for very long.” “What do you think you might change to keep them more engaged?” I’d ask, and she’d quickly come up with a better plan for the next day. As our relationship grew stronger, I could use the “offer a specific comment” strategy that I had learned with the children: “I noticed how surprised and excited the children were when you pulled out the pinecone at circle time, but then they had a hard time waiting for their turns to touch it.” This kind of comment often quickly led to collaborative conversations.

Even better, in a way that would be unlikely to work with three-year-olds, I could extend this strategy by inviting my assistant teacher to make similar comments about my lesson plans, deepening our collaborative rela-

tionship by giving a variety of opportunities for us both to listen to each other. My second time working with a student teacher I drew on this strategy. I started off the semester by saying, “Tell me about what you’re working on, and let’s make a plan together for the support you’d like to get from me.” In the context of a listening-based, collaborative relationship, when I did decide to offer a concrete suggestion, it was much better received. But as with discussing artwork with children, the need to offer direct feedback was rare, since the conversation often gave the teacher (or the child) much more interesting ideas than whatever I had in mind to say.

As I transitioned to administration, I knew I needed to maintain the listening component of my practice to effectively support teachers. When I moved into the role of assistant director at my current school, I was thrilled to have teacher mentorship as part of my job description. I had never formally mentored anyone (aside from a very proscribed relationship with student teachers), but I had learned that simply telling teachers ways I thought they could or should improve wouldn’t be very helpful. Instead, I started the year off with one-on-one meetings with every teacher, during which I asked about what they saw as their strengths and how they’d like to grow this year. We had staff with a huge range of experience and education, from first-year teachers with no formal education experience to veteran teachers with master’s degrees, and they unsurprisingly had a wide range of needs for support. But as I listened to each teacher’s perspective, it became easy to find individualized ways to meet their needs. One teacher, at our first meeting, talked about feeling like she didn’t have a good toolbox of songs and games to use with the children. “How about I record a song every week and send it to you to add to your repertoire?” I suggested. Another teacher described feeling the need to find ways to apply intellectual rigor to her practice; we made a plan together to meet every week or two to discuss teacher research she would do on the more challenging children in her classroom. Some teachers had trouble defining specific big goals but simply found it useful to meet regularly to discuss what was coming up in the classroom. With all of them, I felt most effective as a mentor when I allowed them to define their needs and what my role would be with them.

This intensive approach to listening to teachers has sometimes been difficult to maintain over time. As the year has gone on and other priorities and demands on my time have emerged, it’s been difficult to maintain the regular meetings; some of the teachers haven’t met with me in this context since January. My director and I are discussing possible models to use next year to make it easier to sustain mentorship throughout the year—team-based meetings? more consistent scheduling? It strikes me that maintaining listen-

ing behaviors, and indeed a listening-based stance, over time requires concerted effort. As my practice continues to evolve, this is an aspect that I know will demand my attention.

Listening and Leadership

Teaching in schools that employ emergent curriculum, I began to conceive of the entire process of curriculum and assessment as an intensive practice of listening to children. I would watch children playing and listen in on their conversations, alert for clues to their strengths and their needs, their thinking and their learning. “What is their behavior trying to tell us?” my co-teachers and I would ask at our curriculum meetings.

Through our listening we sometimes heard surface-level but productive messages in children’s behavior. For instance, after a week of engaging but strangely abstract firefighter games, we thought, “Maybe the children are telling us that they’re interested in fire but they don’t know much about it.” We brought candles and pieces of paper to burn (carefully) at circle time, and we practiced using water to put them out. When the children’s pretend play immediately became much more specific, we knew we had heard them correctly.

Other times the children sent us much deeper, more important messages. For instance, one child’s fearful reaction to the (fairly tame) children’s book *There’s a Nightmare in My Closet* (Mayer 1968) led to an intensive whole-class investigation of fear. In weeks-long conversations the three-year-olds talked about what made them feel scared, and they shared strategies for managing those feelings. By the end of our exploration, the children were not only confidently and eagerly reading far scarier books (e.g., *The Wolves in the Walls* [Gaiman and McKean 2003]), they were also using emotional regulation strategies in other parts of their lives. Of course curriculum like this gave my colleagues and me volumes of material for the children’s assessments—the children themselves were telling us the stories of their thinking and learning, and all we had to do was help them express it.

I’ve found leadership at a school-wide level to be reminiscent of emergent curriculum in the classroom: both are processes of responding to the needs of individuals but looking for moments when individual needs align and there is a momentum in what the group needs. Among the staff at the Children’s Community School we have lots of staff meetings, lots of e-mails, and lots of conversations and dialogues, and only sometimes does a coherent need arise from the general ebb and flow of ideas. But when themes arise in the discussions, I’ve been proud of the times that I’ve been able to

listen to a need from staff and then bring my solution-oriented temperament to bear on the issue as they expressed it.

The example closest to my heart is the work our school is doing currently on racial and economic justice. Ever since I joined the school three years ago, we've recognized that while our neighborhood is quite diverse, our school is not. But the issue gained new urgency for us at an emotional staff meeting in the spring of 2015, when several teachers expressed deep discomfort at our school's failure to adequately meet the needs of low-income families and people of color within our community. It wasn't just the relative lack of diversity in the families that we served; we discussed the ways in which our school's mission and values sprung from a belief in the importance of social justice and how we as individuals felt a need to live up to those values in our work. As we prepared to enter a phase of major transition for the school—the departure of a founding co-director, a move to a new site, and the doubling of the size of our program in two years—it became clear that staff felt strongly about the need to prioritize work on racial and economic justice.

Having heard this need expressed so strongly, I knew my director and I needed to take action to address it. The issues were not ones the administration could address alone, of course—a long-term, whole-group concerted effort would be needed. But as a leader at the school I could take steps to make that effort possible. I responded by pushing for us to commit resources to a social justice initiative, and I hired a consultant to come work with us at regular staff meetings throughout the year. At these meetings, we worked collaboratively to articulate our beliefs and values, and a vision for what successful work would look like—to which I responded by drafting our school's public statement on social justice. At further meetings, we set priorities for work in this area, and I coordinated the timeline and task list for the work. By responding to the needs expressed by the staff, I helped create space for this work to happen, and now our "Social Justice Working Group" is collaborating to develop our curriculum around race and bias, to create more inclusive hiring and enrollment practices, to build our financial aid budget, to bring families into this important conversation, and more.

The Challenges of Listening

Using a listening-based approach to working with teaching staff hasn't always been easy for me, and it doesn't always match my temperament well. In particular, when presented with a problem, I often see what I think is the right solution immediately and want to get straight to work on fixing it, regardless of how other people see the situation. Additionally, as a writer at

heart, I often labor under the false belief that if I just put the exact right words on paper, the problem will be fixed. Above my desk I've put signs that say, "Don't write it up yet" and "Don't e-mail it yet," because I've often found that, while I think the solution is publication-ready, I usually need to spend some time listening to others' perspectives before I rush ahead.

For instance, we spent the fall of 2014 through the winter of 2015 revising the assessment tools we use at my school. The issue arose when we realized that we didn't have a coherent articulation of what children were supposed to learn at our school, something definitive to draw on when assessing children and creating curriculum. "I can fix that!" I thought, and over the course of a week I created from scratch the solution I saw in my head—a detailed description of all the things I thought children should be learning in preschool, divided into developmental domains and broken up into skills and subskills and sub-subskills. Unfortunately, while this was a tool I was creating for all the teachers at our school to use, I had neglected to ask them what they needed from it, compelled instead by my own vision. In retrospect there were some skeptical looks when I brought it to the next staff meeting, but I pushed, and teachers, to their credit, were willing to try it out. I had a lovely time using it that semester for assessments, but everyone else found it almost impossible to use. "It's too confusing! There's too much in it! How am I supposed to page through all of this on a daily basis?" It took about five more drafts before what I had thought was perfect actually met the needs of the other teachers. Perhaps if I had started by saying, "I think I can make a document that has this information—what would we all need from such a document?" it might have been a smoother process.

Listening beyond the School Walls

Recently I've been thinking a lot about expanding the model of listening beyond the confines of a single school and into the broader community. For years my preschool has been friendly with a few other preschools in the neighborhood—we'd see each other at conferences and meetings, and our directors would occasionally drop by each other's sites. It occurred to me that while in some ways other preschools in the neighborhood are our competitors, in many ways we have shared interests. "None of us have enough substitute teachers, and none of our subs get enough work!" I thought. "Maybe if all the schools shared one sub list, schools and subs would all be better off!" Once I started thinking this way, I had a million ideas. Shared health insurance plans for lower costs! Shared professional development budgets to pay for better trainings! Shared political activism to get more resources

for all of us! I began reaching out to schools the fall of 2015 to see if anyone would be interested.

However, I had learned by now that if I said, “Hey everyone, I think we should get together and do *this*,” it would be, at best, “Jarrod’s Project” and not an effort that truly elevated all of us. I’ll admit that I was pleased with myself for knowing enough not to walk into the first meeting full of my own plans, but rather to spend the first few meetings simply brainstorming what we could do—what needs we shared that would be worth working on together. It quickly became clear that while some of my more grandiose visions would be nice, there were more pressing and more achievable needs at hand. For instance, several of the programs expressed frustration at simply not having peers to reach out to for input, and we decided to set up a mailing list so we could reach out to each other with questions like, “Can anyone recommend a plumber?” or “Would anyone mind sharing their school’s vaccination policy with us?” This kind of communication has been meeting a small, immediate need, which turned out to be just as important as some of the bigger needs I had envisioned before listening to anyone else. We’ve been gradually expanding to other modest efforts, like sending teachers to observe at each other’s schools and hosting a low-key “Early Childhood Info Day” for local families. Perhaps as time goes on we’ll work together on more ambitious goals, but for now we’re successfully sharing with each other and supporting each other.

Telling and Listening to Stories

One of my favorite practices with children is cooperative storytelling. I’ll gather five or six children and say, “Let’s tell a story together. Once upon a time there was . . . who should be in our story?” “A froggie!” a child might say. “Yes, there was a froggie. And one day the froggie was hopping along, when what do you think she saw?” “Her house! With her mommy froggie and the baby froggie!” “That’s right, she saw her house. So she hopped right up to her mommy froggie and asked her something very important. What did she ask about?” . . . and so on, until we find a natural ending together. As soon as the story is over I ask, “Should we listen to our story?” and I turn on the recording I just made.¹ After listening, I might say, “Let’s act it out!” and

1. It turns out that three-year-olds are not very good at talking and listening at the same time; recording their story and playing it back sometimes elicits astonishment at what they’ve created and pushes deeper reflection and learning. See Foley and Green (2015) for more about this approach.

let the children revisit what they've just said and heard, this time with their bodies. After that I might offer, "Let's draw the story. Which part of the story do you think would make an interesting drawing?" By offering children a structured context to share their ideas, and to listen to their own ideas and those of others, I empower children to see themselves as powerful creators of their own experiences.

By this point, you will be unsurprised to learn that I created space for storytelling with teachers as well. A couple of years ago I hosted a series of Teacher Story Nights, first in my living room and then at a few conferences. I was inspired initially simply by all the teachers I knew who told engaging, powerful, funny stories about their work. At the same time, I knew that most teachers spend most of their professional time flying solo, figuring out solutions and strategies for themselves, with no one to truly share with. So I thought, "If we came together and shared stories of our work, we'd all feel more connected, and we'd all have a great time."

At the Story Nights, a wide variety of teachers shared an incredibly diverse range of stories. A college English professor told a thought-provoking story about a class of students who cheated on an exam he gave and how personally he took it. A third-grade teacher told a touching story about the death of a classroom goldfish. A high school Latin teacher told an enlightening story about how her previous career as a horse trainer prepared her for working with adolescent humans. A kindergarten teacher told a side-splittingly funny story about the behavior in her classroom that became known as "The Butt High-Five."

Through the laughs and the pensive pauses at the story nights, what struck me most was the sense of recognition, of teachers seeing ourselves in each other's stories. Even though our practices were often very different (the kindergarten teacher had never given an exam to worry about cheating on, and the college professor almost certainly wouldn't ever see his students doing the Butt High-Five), there were themes and questions that tied all of the stories together—the emotional lives of students, managing our own expectations, the difference between plans and outcomes, and so on. When I started podcasting the stories,² I felt like I was expanding our community of teachers. Teachers I didn't know sometimes reached out to me to contribute stories to the podcast, or wrote to ask to use a story in a class they were teaching. And while I loved sharing the stories online, and I still go back and listen to them, the storytelling nights were the most fun—a roomful of colleagues, creating their own narratives and simply listening to each other.

2. See "Telling Tales out of School," at teacherstories.org.

Leadership and Collaboration

As a theater major in college, I read a wonderful book by an improv teacher named Keith Johnstone (1979), in which, at one point, he describes useful techniques for working with adults struggling to “be creative.” In one passage he describes working with a woman who, when asked to tell a story, insists that she couldn’t think of one. Johnstone replies that he’s thought of a story, but she’ll have to guess it by asking yes and no questions. The woman proceeds to ask questions that uncover a bizarre story about giant bugs who live in abandoned buildings and eventually destroy the world. Only it turns out that Johnstone didn’t have a story in mind at all and instead answered “yes” and “no” essentially at random until the woman hit upon a story of her own. By creating a different kind of storytelling space he allowed the woman to express her ideas much more easily.

It strikes me that this story is in some ways a rather neat metaphor for the connection between listening and leading. Johnstone, by creating a space in which the woman was able to tell her story, was in a leadership role, but his leadership wasn’t about trying to control the narrative; rather, it was about facilitating the woman’s own control of the narrative. That doesn’t mean that his leadership was without intention or direction; on the contrary, despite his unconcern with the content of the story itself, his goal toward his student was quite specific. In other words, listening-based leadership is an intentional stance, which can be used simultaneously to lead toward certain outcomes—by asking the right questions, drawing out certain things, creating spaces for particular ideas—and to allow those being listened to a high degree of agency of their own.

Listening, to me, is the bridge between leadership and collaboration. Without an intentional practice of listening, the leader can only lead in the direction of his or her own ideas. A leader who knows how to listen, by contrast, creates a collaboration with the led, a community in which all are working together toward shared goals. As a teacher leader, listening to teachers both enhances my leadership role and builds power, and even leadership, in the teachers I listen to.

As good teachers, we know the importance of listening to children. As teacher leaders, we do well to remember to listen to each other.

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