

**BECOMING A
LITERACY
LEADER**

S E C O N D E D I T I O N

SUPPORTING LEARNING AND CHANGE

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Foreword by Franki Sibberson
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: LAYERED COACHING

This is not work for the faint-hearted. To do it well requires a calm disposition and the trust-building skills of a mediator combined with the steely determination and perseverance of an innovator.

—ELLEN GUINEY

I AM

Who am I? What am I? I have read all of the definitions of reading coach, literacy specialist, and reading apprentice. I am reluctant to define myself as anything but a teacher. What I can do is tell you about myself, and share my stories about becoming a literacy leader.

I am fast talking, fast walking, and full of life. I spring out of bed each morning ready to tackle new challenges, and flop into bed at night depleted of all energy. My mind is always at work, churning with new ideas and thinking. I am a listener, a partner, and a subtle agent for change. I work with teachers, Title I reading technicians, parents, literacy specialists, administrators, and students. My work is multilayered. It begins at the district level on the leadership team, collecting and analyzing data to determine district needs, plan initiatives, and set goals. From here it moves to the school level, where my responsibilities branch out in many directions: Title I coordinator, staff developer, and developer of curriculum and assessment.

The next layer is in the classroom, where I work with teachers and students. I support school initiatives by providing professional development for all staff. I provide opportunities for teachers to pursue new learning and deepen knowledge through participation in study groups.

I have worked as a licensed literacy specialist for grades three through five since 2000. Before that I taught third grade for nine years. I entered my current position as literacy specialist without a job description. The district had redirected its focus on literacy for grades K–5 because the results of state testing indicated that our students were struggling to meet the standard in reading and writing. I was hired to “support literacy.” There had not been a literacy specialist in my position for eight years. I have had the luxury of creating my identity as a literacy support person and establishing a partnership with the K–2 literacy specialist. My identity as a literacy leader has developed and evolved over the last fifteen years.

WE ARE

We are a K–12 school district. We have four large schools. The George J. Mitchell School serves students in kindergarten through grade three. There are approximately thirty classroom teachers and six hundred students, plus support staff. Students then move to the Albert S. Hall School, which serves grades four and five. This school has roughly twenty teachers and a little less than three hundred students. After fifth grade, students move to the junior high school for sixth through eighth grade and then to the high school for ninth through twelfth. I work at the George J. Mitchell School (working with third-grade teachers and students) and also at the Albert S. Hall School (grades four and five).

The school district is in a small city in Maine. The free and reduced-price lunch population is over 60 percent, and we have a yearly transient rate of 33 percent. By tracking students over a three-year period, we have found that our transient rate increases to more than 50 percent. Students come and go and come back. When I wrote the first edition of the book, our city was a hub for a regional hospital that employed medical staff, but now, nine years later, a new centralized hospital has been built in Augusta, Maine, twenty miles away. We do, however, have a new homeless shelter, which sleeps about sixty people and is in the process of being renovated to increase capacity. In my twenty-five years in the district, I’ve never seen so many new students registered with a shelter as their primary residence. In this same town, we have two private colleges that employ many professors. The children of these well-educated professionals are thrown into the mix of our struggling community—a community that once housed prosperous paper mills.

SHARED LEADERSHIP

It feels awkward to write this book using the word *I*. I find myself typing the word *we* only to delete it and replace it with *I*. I am part of a team, and it is through this shared leadership team that I support literacy. I collaborate with principals, literacy specialists, teachers, librarians, support staff, and parents. We work together to achieve goals that we have set as a district.

My journey as a literacy specialist included my partner Rose Patterson, the K–2 literacy specialist for the last fifteen years, and will now include my new partner Kim Carey. Although the stories I share reflect my personal experiences in becoming a literacy leader, my overall literacy journey includes collaborating with Rose, grade-level leaders, and building administrators. Since 2000 we have worked together to generate new ideas, process new learning, and ensure that the literacy curriculum and student learning is streamlined for students in kindergarten through grade five. We work to ensure consistency between grade levels and across buildings within the district.

The district is committed to providing high-quality in-house professional development with a focus on increasing the quality of instruction. By working in-house supporting teachers in literacy, I am able to respond to teachers' needs and provide modeling and follow-through support. Literacy support is delivered in the natural setting of the classrooms in which the teachers work. Professional development opportunities within the district have been designed to meet the standards put forth by the US Department of Education, Common Core Standards, and Learning Forward (formerly the National Staff Development Council) and incorporate the latest research on providing high-quality professional development. The position of literacy specialist as reading coach supports these standards for providing in-house professional development opportunities.

UPDATED THINKING

The upside of writing a new edition to a book is that I get to update my thinking. There are three ideas that I would like to emphasize as foundational understandings to my work as a literacy leader: layered leadership, making meaning together, and rowing in the same direction as a school community. Rewriting this book gives me a second chance to share my perspective on how literacy leaders have the opportunity to build capacity within schools.

LAYERED LEADERSHIP

I am now fifteen-plus years into the job. I have lived through change and the constant flipping of initiatives at both the national and state level. The constant curriculum work and changing of assessments would have anyone in a tailspin. In the last five years alone, our state has changed state assessments from Maine Learning Results to NECAP to Smarter Balance, only to ditch that assessment after a year. No wonder teachers are apprehensive about new initiatives. Through all the change, however, our district has stayed the course in terms of its commitment to literacy leadership. Our guiding question for our work has and continues to be, “If this all went away, would we be working to support best practice?” How lucky I am to work in a district that has stayed committed to literacy leadership amid constant change.

Because we have stayed the course, I have been given the gift of time to work through the literacy leadership model that we have implemented. I can finally articulate the purpose and intention behind the multitude of supports that we have in place for teachers; I have come to think of them as “layers.” These layers, when planned out with purpose and intention, can support learning and change within schools. I had my own aha moment a few years ago when I realized that each chapter in the first edition was really a different coaching layer (see Figure 1.1). Since then, I often share at workshops that if I were to rewrite my book, I would rename each chapter to reflect this.

Figure 1.1

VARIED LAYERS OF SUPPORT THAT COACHES CAN IMPLEMENT WITHIN A SCHOOL

- Being a Resource
- Designing Required Professional Development that Includes Voice and Choice
- Facilitating Study Groups
- Coaching in Classrooms
- Supporting Curriculum and Assessment
- Designing Structures to Support Kids on the Bubble
- Creating Unity through Whole School Experiences
- Cultivating Teacher Leadership
- Maintaining the Nuts and Bolts of Literacy Programming within the School

CHAPTER 2

BEING A RESOURCE: A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN FOR LITERACY

The teaching profession has never been honored with any first-class touches. But a quiet room used for staff development can become truly elegant when it contains a tray of cookies, a basket of fresh fruit, a pot of good coffee with real milk. It can be made elegant with the addition of carefully duplicated articles, well thought-out calendars, and invitations to attend relevant conferences.

—SHELLEY HARWAYNE, *GOING PUBLIC*

I vividly remember walking for the first time into the classroom I was assigned as a literacy specialist. I anxiously unlocked the door of the room in the basement. There I stood, staring at a large bare space, empty except for a mound of dusty old literacy materials in a three-foot-high pile in the center of the floor.

My only request as I moved from the position of third-grade teacher to literacy specialist was to be given a classroom. I knew that much of my time would be spent helping teachers in the school understand and implement best practices in literacy. When I imagined what I wanted the room to be like, I dreamed of an inviting space like the ones designed for children by so many classroom teachers I admired—colorful, bright, clean, and inviting.

There was a reason why the room was bare and the materials were dusty. There had not been a literacy specialist in the school for eight years. Teachers in the school had a history of literature-based reading instruction long before other districts had replaced basal readers. The school had a wide selection of multiple copies of children’s literature texts housed in closets in the hallway outside my room. My new school had a veteran staff, and I often heard parents say, “We don’t have to worry about our kids at the Hall School. The teachers are excellent and know the kids.”

I was young enough to be the daughter of many of the teachers. I knew that the staff was knowledgeable and didn’t want or need an outsider telling them the “right way” to teach reading and writing. What they needed was support to meet the ever-changing demands of state and national mandates. I predicted that my expertise and energy would be best used if they came to see me as an invaluable resource. The design and materials of the literacy room would be at the center of my becoming that resource for colleagues. I thought hard not only about the layout of the room, but about how I wanted teachers to use it, interacting with one another and me. I hung up new sheer white curtains, plugged in two lamps for soft lighting, positioned framed student artwork on the walls, and set out to create the literacy room.

When I began to plan how I would use the space, I considered how the layout and displays might inspire teachers. In her book *In the Company of Children*, third-grade teacher Joanne Hindley quotes her colleague Isobel Beaton describing the “geography” of a space:

Geography is everything. I realized that I needed to figure out what I wanted to happen and how my classroom geography could support and enhance or inhibit or deter those goals. A country’s geography predetermines a lot of what goes on in that country—for example, rivers and mountains form natural barriers and then people/society put up others; a railroad cut, a highway, a wall. But in my classroom I determine the geography. I can put up barriers to communication or I can set things up to encourage conversation. I can establish lonely islands of I’s or I can form communities and provinces of we’s. Everyone can have his or her own of each thing or groups can share. I can make that sharing difficult or I can support it. All the energy in my room can come from me or I can have constellations of energy. And the geography I put in place will do that for me. (1996, p. 5)