

# Educational Leaders Discuss the Essence of Leadership

**Editors' Note:** To offer a broader perspective on the concept of leadership in education, we invited three current leaders to respond to a series of questions related to this issue's theme, *The Essence of Improvement: Leadership in Language Arts Instruction*. Responding without hesitation and offering readers a sense of how they approach leadership were Jocelyn Chadwick, Leigh Patel, and Ken Lindblom. Questions were sent to them via email last October. Their responses reveal how the topic of leadership, itself, could be viewed through many lenses. Jocelyn Chadwick focused on the practices of leadership with emphasis on the importance of role models and the power of what she calls "negotiative discourse"—that is, learning with, and seeking to understand, the people you are leading. Leigh Patel encourages leaders to develop an understanding of the role of formal education in racist capitalism while offering us a reading list that is sure to teach and inspire us. Ken Lindblom elaborates on the administrator's role in knocking down barriers to student learning while elevating the role of the teacher as a critical source of educational knowledge and expertise. We thank them for responding to our call and for sharing the ideas and perspectives they gained over their years in the field.

## Learning with Those You Lead

Jocelyn A. Chadwick is president of the National Council of Teachers of English and author of *The Jim Dilemma: Reading Race in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Dr. Chadwick, an English teacher, scholar, and lecturer, is currently conducting a



seminar at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She has worked with Ken Burns, PBS, WGBH (in Boston), and was invited to the White House as a panel member for the series *Celebrating America's Authors*. In addition to teaching

and writing, Dr. Chadwick works with teachers and middle and high school students around the country in areas such as literature, writing, and modern and classical rhetoric. Dr. Chadwick also serves as a consultant for NBC News Education. Additional publications include *Common Core: Paradigmatic Shifts*; *Teaching Literature in the Context of Literacy Instruction*; *Mark Twain Meets Generation Z: Challenges, Questions, and New Perspectives*; *We Dare Not Teach What We Know We Must: The Importance of Difficult Conversations*; *21st Century Challenge: Necessary Perspectives on Uncle Tom's Cabin and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn as Anti-Slavery Novels*; and *Critical Insights: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Dr. Chadwick currently has in progress *Writing for Life: Using Literature to Teach Writing*.

**EJ:** What types of leadership roles have you held?

**JC:** I was a grade-level chair at Irving High School, a program director at the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, and chair of numerous high school and university committees, including leading task forces under Kent Williamson (former NCTE Executive Emeritus). I served as the chair of NCTE's Secondary Section and am presently the president of NCTE. Finally, I see myself as a

scholar-leader with a passion for engaging classroom teachers and students, as well as maintaining a research agenda and publishing.

**EJ:** How has your approach to leading and your concept of leadership changed over the years?

**JC:** Throughout my life, I have been surrounded by strong men and strong women. Since early childhood, I had stellar leadership role models with my parents, my maternal and paternal grandparents, my church, and community leaders—locally and nationally. My parents supported my attending civil rights meetings with my father. I watched him and other local and national leaders negotiate and persuade audiences, explicate the needs at the time, and describe their vision for the future. So, their influence was the germ. Later, I compared the leadership approaches of English department chairs at Irving High School. This turned out to be a pivotal experience. In an English department, the required balance of strength, focus, voice, and identity came together in one person who had to lead 25 equally strong and knowledgeable personalities. Though very young, I learned well from that chair—and from my mother who was an elementary teacher. As I entered my life's profession as an English teacher—an independent feminist/womanist, African American, Southerner, and most of all, a Chadwick and a Brown woman—who I *could* become as a leader began to emerge.

**EJ:** What does “leadership in education” mean to you?

**JC:** As Carol Gilligan asserts, leadership at times requires a negotiative discourse. At other times, it is linear, objective, and singular with leaders needing to stand alone, if necessary, for ethical reasons. Effective leadership is *always* understanding and probing the audience to inform oneself. Leadership is tapping into human resources to provide the highest level of service. Leadership is not believing your own press; and leadership is never forgetting the *why* and the *ethics* of the mission and all those individuals—teachers and students—who have placed their trust in you.

**EJ:** What symbol, image, or metaphor represents your approach toward/experiences with successful leadership?

**JC:** My father died when I was ten but this is the image I carry with me to this day: My father standing tall at civic hall meetings, leaders like

Barbara Jordan and Dr. Martin Luther King in our living room with church deacons and trustees—all focused, fearless, informed, deliberate, passionate, and, above all, ethical and hopeful for the future of the children.

**EJ:** What advice do you have for the many “teacher leaders” in the field, that is, department chairs, ELA coordinators, grade-level leaders, etc.?

**JC:** First, we must remember that what we do is as organic and as protean as time itself. Our students and the times are in a constant state of flux. In such a milieu, teacher leaders must adjust, rethink, reflect, and recalibrate to address different audiences, times, and people-factors—never forgetting the import of what they bring to the table for their students, that is, the ability to read, write, listen, speak, and think critically. Second, teacher leaders should never stop learning with their students, never stop listening, *earnestly* listening—and not interpolating.

**EJ:** How can teachers be agents of change in this era of standardization, high-stakes testing, and prepackaged curricula?

**JC:** Any iteration of testing, whether teacher-generated or in some other form, is what I describe as an *is*. We have had some form of testing and assessment since the 1920s, and with more parental and community involvement requiring “accountability,” we must think smart and direct our energies to being agents of change within this context. This said, we must be vocal in establishing ourselves as content specialists with expertise to write curricula and assessments. We must be proactive, seeking ways we can be integral to these endeavors. We must also be willing to devote the necessary time. This is “messy” work, and none of it is quick or easy.

**EJ:** Can you share a time when an educational leader changed your outlook or perspective on a critical issue?

**JC:** When I taught high school, my home state of Texas had an exceptional and forward-thinking set of curricula. The state agency, board, and districts worked together for the good of the students. This balance and focus changed over the past 20 years, and I despaired. However, the Texas Education Agency, Texas teachers, and the state recently revised their positions regarding education. The agency and the state board sought the involvement of teachers and administrators. The Texas Council



of Teachers of English Language Arts, one of our amazing affiliates, stands out as a K–16 teacher leader group working to assure that teachers have a voice, and using technology to further this effort. Stellar!

**EJ:** What book or text has had an impact on you in terms of leadership?

**JC:** There are many. Frederick Douglass's *The Douglass Monthly* (1859–1862); Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice from the South* (1892); William James's *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (1899); Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare to Teach* (2005); and, finally, John Dewey's *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Teaching* (1916).

**EJ:** In your experience, what misconceptions do teachers have about the role of administrators?

**JC:** Stereotype, one size fits all—therefore, no exceptions. I have met some administrators who are exceptional; they span gender, ethnicity, geography, religion, etc. The one common factor these exceptional administrators shared? They all were formerly ELA classroom teachers.

**EJ:** How can classroom teachers provide leadership?

**JC:** We lead every day in our classrooms with our students; and if we don't, we must. Teachers must reflect and weigh the benefits and consequences for our students before we act and speak, but we *must* act and speak. We must be thinkers and have a deep understanding of our content. And sometimes we must stand alone and speak up to those who may make us feel uncomfortable. As soldiers are taught to advance toward hostile fire, teacher leaders must go *toward*, not away from, our mission of providing literacy for all students.

**EJ:** Finally, if you had complete power and authority over all educational matters, what two changes would you implement to improve teaching and learning?

**JC:** First, I would shift the focus *away from* what our children *cannot* achieve because of their ethnic, social, regional, religious, or physically/emotionally challenged state. These elements, while most certainly factors, have now morphed into albatrosses around the necks of teachers and, *tragically*, they have been absorbed by our children and their parents. Next, I would work to destroy

the educational silos we have built: silos that preclude our collaboration and progress, that is, elementary curriculum is not connected to the secondary curriculum; PreK–12 is not connected to college; English, as a subject, is not connected with composition—which does not connect with rhetoric—which does not connect with the teaching of English—which does not connect with anything other than pedagogy. Is there any wonder that English as a college major is diminishing?



### Shifting the Leadership Frame from Individualistic to Collective

Leigh Patel is an interdisciplinary researcher, educator, and writer. Her work addresses the narratives that facilitate societal structures.

With a background in sociology, Dr. Patel researches and teaches about education as a site of social reproduction and as a potential site for transformation. She works extensively with teacher activists and societally marginalized youth. Prior to working in the academy, Dr. Patel was a journalist, a teacher, and a state-level policymaker.

**EJ:** What types of leadership roles have you held?

**LP:** I have been a peer leader, classroom leader, state-level policymaker, and leader in the grassroots organization Education for Liberation. At times, I have been an emotional leader in my family, and, in each of those roles, I have also been a learner, listener; and, I have been *led*.

**EJ:** How has your approach to leading and your concept of leadership changed over the years?

**LP:** I had the great fortune of having several stunningly creative educational leaders and the all too typical experience of having many unimaginative leaders. I learned from all of them, things they meant to teach intentionally and unintentionally. My first academic appointment was under the leadership of then dean Allan Luke. Allan taught me, through his actions, how to walk the talk of having an analysis of power and interrupting colonization. Allan put structures in place to break up the significant hierarchical power structures in higher education. He listened, he

lifted as much as he asked anyone else to lift in doing the work, and he was not afraid to imagine otherwise ways of being with each other. My approach to leading was incredibly gifted by the early and influential contact with him as dean. One of the key lessons I learned from him is to not ignore or deny power when it is possible to use it. I have also seen the ways that women, all women of color, have lifted others up as they have risen. Sonia Nieto, Kris Gutierrez, Ailen Moreton-Robinson all made space for me in their very busy schedules, put me in positions where I could influence others and be influenced productively, and they also provided deeply human models of leaders. Each of these leaders made me see that not only is it possible to be a scholarly leader who is human and humble, it is the *only way*.

**EJ:** What does “leadership in education” mean to you?

**LP:** First and foremost, leadership in education must marshal a humble stewardship of learning. At this moment, we are flush with well-paid leaders in education who have much to say about innovation but precious little to say about learning, and even less to say about the population-level patterns of denied access to education. Leadership in education must be able to reckon with the legacies and the shortcomings of Eurocentric frames of human development that are individualistic and exist for the purpose of achievement and domination. In kind, it must also know of epistemologies that aren’t simply counter to Eurocentric empire, but are grounded in what came before, built side streets for themselves, and what is possible when we prioritize relation and connectivity over achievement and certificates. If an educational leader does not know what kind of learning took place in Noir Marron communities, then I believe they, minimally, have much to learn about learning and its steady relationship to freedom. I think it is difficult to be an education leader who has only learned about one narrow form of being on this planet.

**EJ:** What symbol, image, or metaphor represents your approach toward/experiences with successful leadership?

**LP:** This question—and all of the questions about leadership—brings up for me a productive tension between individuals and how social change and well-being are attributed. A person who is prominent in my mind when I think about this

tension is Coretta Scott King. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. has been whitewashed and sanitized in the interest of a certain progressive and incremental symbolism of change that wants no change at all. But perhaps even more profound than that is the dearth of what our teachers and children learn about Coretta Scott King. She was a force unto herself, was key in radicalizing her husband, and was embedded in social change efforts when threats and terrorism were daily realities for her and her family. Successful leadership is everywhere, without titles or prominent positions, and it is always plural and differential in social locations. There has been no successful social movement on this land that has not had Black, Indigenous, and women of color at the forefront. But this isn’t just a matter of not knowing the facts, it’s a matter of shifting our frames of leadership from individualistic to collective, which has more historical accuracy, particularly when it comes to societal change for the greater good.

**EJ:** What advice do you have for the many “teacher leaders” in the field, that is, department chairs, ELA coordinators, grade-level leaders, etc.?

**LP:** I would advise those in positions of power to be well-informed about the role that formal education has played in racist capitalism, the pedagogies that social movements engage in, and to be rigorously grounded in the values they hold as leaders. Being in the formal role does not make one a leader, but there is a potential there. I think that educational leaders could benefit greatly from reading deeply about the educational justice projects created and enacted by Mary McLeod Bethune, Anna Julia Cooper, and Jessie Little Doe Baird.

**EJ:** How can teachers be agents of change in this era of standardization, high-stakes testing, and prepackaged curricula?

**LP:** Teachers are, of course, always engaging in political education. The question is which set of politics and what kind of political education do they choose to prioritize in their classrooms. Classrooms, and more substantively, learning, are always potentially catalytic places. The act of tracing alphabet letters into the palms of children’s hands when literacy was illegal for enslaved peoples contains entire universes of what learning is, who it belongs to, and how we can step into its power. I advise the beginning teachers with whom I work to



find each other, in schools, in communities. Fighting a behemoth cannot be done in isolation. We need to support each other, challenge each other, and do so in ways that nourish us to speak back to nonsensical colonial ideas of linear progress, development, and achievement that have strangled the more liberatory practices of learning and freedom.

**EJ:** What book or text has had an impact on you in terms of leadership?

**LP:** I'm going to cheat here a little and choose two texts and a poet's entire body of work. First is *Freedom Dreams* by Robin D. G. Kelley. If I could, I would make this text mandatory for people interested in education, particularly anyone involved in leadership. This book, a historical analysis of Black liberation movements, has so much to teach us about the public and private pedagogies of social movements. It details how we must know our histories to dream into existence other kinds of futures. An educational leader recently asked me what utility courses like Critical Race Theory have. Well, without the purpose of dreaming a different future into existence, they have restricted utility. But the best historians, sociologists, and poets I know do not make false divides between critical, accurate analysis, and traditions of freedom and self-determination. Second, I'd recommend James Baldwin's *A Letter to My Nephew*. I don't travel anywhere without the first printed copy I read of this essay, now with soft, delicate edges where it has been folded and unfolded dozens of times. Baldwin spoke to his nephew with the care and respect that elders should speak with when explaining the gravity of ongoing racist heteropatriarchal capitalism. Baldwin's role was to speak to his nephew of the brilliance in his family, how that brilliance is ignored and erased in this society, and then lays the challenge of stepping into that brilliance at his nephew's feet. Our responsibility, when we are invited to be leaders, is to speak as rigorously and accurately from what we know—but not to dictate how younger leaders should step into their moments of possibility. And, lastly, everything that June Jordan wrote. Truly, she gave us everything we need.

**EJ:** Finally, if you had complete power and authority over all educational matters, what two changes would you implement to improve teaching and learning?

**LP:** It is imperative that education is decoupled from income level, particularly in light of the generational racist economic deprivation that this nation was founded on and maintains. We simply have never had the will to truly wish learning and wellness equitably upon all beings. A meager first step is refusing to allow one's income level to determine access to resources and well-trained teachers. Second, I desperately wish that schools of education in higher education would have more to say about learning and liberation than they do about achievement and certification. We have grossly conflated achievement with learning, which has resulted in a society that handsomely rewards students who come from dominant cultural backgrounds and punishes those who do not replicate those same practices—though racist capitalism has multiple tentacles to deny them access to wellness even if they *did* replicate those practices. Teachers and teacher educators must know this history and structure much more thoroughly than they currently do, and that can open a space to distinguish between learning and “studenting.”



### Student Learning as the Central Goal

Ken Lindblom is an associate professor of English and dean of the School of Professional Development at Stony Brook University on Long Island, New York. His office administers teacher education, higher education administration, human resource management, and other credit and noncredit professional programs at the university. A former high school English teacher, Ken was director of English teacher education at Stony Brook from 2003 to 2016 and served as editor of *English Journal* from 2008 to 2013.

**EJ:** What types of leadership roles have you held?

**KL:** While a graduate student at Syracuse University, I was a manager of a teaching assistant program that was designed to orient new teaching assistants to their role. It included a week of orientation for international students. I've also been a director of a teacher center, which provided professional development for eleven school districts

in upstate New York, and I've been director of an English teacher education program, an associate dean, and now, a dean at Stony Brook University.

**EJ:** How has your approach to leading and your concept of leadership changed over the years?

**KL:** I've learned the importance of delegating responsibilities to colleagues, and I've become more open and transparent about my decisions. I ask for help more often, and I communicate my ideas more often with colleagues. I've also become more organized in my strategic planning and I had to learn more about budgets and accounting practices to run a school.

**EJ:** What does "leadership in education" mean to you?

**KL:** Leadership in education means always keeping the learning of the students as the only goal. Keeping that front and center will always keep an education leader focused on the right things. Of course, that means doing everything necessary to support students and teachers. It means ensuring that teachers have everything they need to do their jobs well. It means keeping up on the latest knowledge in teaching, content, and organizational theory. It means motivating and educating. It means keeping unproductive, even hostile, external forces at bay, and it means supporting societal change that will increase all students' learning. It means advocating externally and internally for student learning. It means doing everything necessary to ensure all students have all they need (e.g., food, quiet space, safety) to be able to learn at their best. It means providing a professional context that allows—and obligates—teachers to do what they know is best for their students' learning, allowing them to ignore, if needed, anything that could impede student learning. We have a "bottom line" in education: it is student learning—and standardized exams don't reflect student learning well enough to be reliable measures on their own.

**EJ:** What symbol, image, or metaphor represents your experiences with successful leadership?

**KL:** A pyramid. At the top is student learning, and immediately below is the student/teacher exchange. Beneath that is all the layers of administration—and at the bottom is the educational leader, whose job is to support all that is supporting student learning.

**EJ:** What advice do you have for the many teacher leaders in the field such as department chairs, ELA coordinators, grade-level leaders, etc.?

**KL:** There are no dilemmas in education. Anything that improves student learning is good. Anything that doesn't contribute to student learning is either irrelevant or bad.

**EJ:** How can teachers be agents of change in this era of standardization, high-stakes testing, and prepackaged curricula?

**KL:** Teachers must be experts in and advocates for the most effective teaching practices for their students. They should use their voices in meetings; learn to speak truth to power firmly but politely and professionally; get to know the community from which their students come and get to know the members of that community, so that the community will support them; they should depend on their professional associations (such as NCTE) to amplify and steady their voices; they should resist anything negative for student learning imposed on their classrooms; and they must work closely with other teachers because teachers have the numbers and the collective expertise—but as individuals, they can be ostracized and dismissed.

**EJ:** Can you share a time when an educational leader changed your outlook or perspective on a critical issue?

**KL:** When I was a young teacher at Columbia High School in upstate New York, my department chair, Kevin McCann, explained to me that a student's behavior reflected a difficult home environment. I replied, "That doesn't excuse his behavior!" He said, "Of course it doesn't excuse it, but it *explains* it." I hear that in my head frequently—even 25 years later. We need to explore why students act/think/do as they do. That will help us find the support they need to improve.

**EJ:** What book or text has had an impact on you in terms of leadership?


**KL:** *Leading at the Edge: Leadership Lessons from the Extraordinary Saga of Shackleton's Antarctic Expedition* by Dennis N. T. Perkins. I read it last summer. Very cool. It tells the story of a disastrous expedition and draws research-based conclusions about leadership along the way.

**EJ:** Finally, if you had complete power and authority over all educational matters, what two



changes would you implement to improve the teaching/learning process?

**KL:** I would focus all resources *directly* on improvements in student learning. This would require more accurate ways of assessing student learning including peer observation, observation by outside experts, and portfolio assessment. This would also require cutting out a great deal of “school stuff” that is not directly supportive of student learning. In addition, I would do

everything possible to elevate the role of teachers and enable our culture to see the value they bring to students. These would include salary increases where needed, public relations programs, professional development, and teaching assistants. Students aren’t widgets, and schools aren’t profit centers. Students are the makers of the future, and schools are where they become who they will be when they make that future. Student learning is the fuel of the future and stretches its limits. 

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## The Student Poets

have it all figured out—how dreams  
shatter, love goes awry, and even  
daybreak brings a little sadness.

In their poems the beaches are sunny  
with gently lapping waves, and mountains  
rise like giants in the fluffy clouds.

But whatever the scenery, they know  
the poet’s consolation is only partial, lasting  
no longer than the blink of an eye.

They know that a long thought needs a long line, while  
a short one needs only a  
word.

They understand the fine points of enjamb-  
ment and how rhyme is for beginners,  
infernal if not internal.

Their work flows from their pens  
in a miracle of completeness. *It just came  
to me, they say, late last night.*

I envy them that fluency, that ease  
with the ways of the heart, that grasp  
of life’s daily disasters.

I have a lot to learn from them,  
I, who can hardly write a line  
without a lifetime of anguish.

—Ken Autrey  
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Now residing in Alabama, **Ken Autrey** (autreyken@gmail.com) taught for many years at Francis Marion University in South Carolina. His work has appeared in *Chattahoochee Review*, *English Journal*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Texas Review*, and other journals. He has published three chapbooks: *Pilgrim* (Main Street Rag), *Rope Lesson* (Longleaf Press), and *The Wake of the Year* (Solomon and George).

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