

## **A Minoritized Art Teacher's Perspective on Teacher Leadership: Teacher Leadership through Community Leadership and Collaborative Efforts**

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As a Vietnamese 28-year veteran art teacher, my lived experience is that art teaching is not a viable means to gain access to formal leadership or to exercise my personal leadership within school in a large school district. As an Asian descent educator, there is limited opportunity for a leadership role. For many years, I felt that the isolation and helplessness in teaching was a deterrent to my professional and personal growth in the teaching profession. Into my fifth year of teaching, I determined to return to my advocacy and love for community service through artmaking. I decided to create leadership opportunities for myself to grow and to lead and for my students to have access to other educational benefits that only community can provide. This article highlights my commitment to become an art teacher leader through community leadership and providing service-learning projects for my students. In this article, I share three recent examples of how teacher leadership combined with community (Gilbert, 1972; Hunter, 1980; Nix & Seerley, 1972) and collaborative leadership can maximize student learning and teacher growth personally and professionally.

### **Teacher Leadership Through Community Leadership**

In 1982, I arrived in the United States with three other siblings. I was a sixteen-year-old refugee from Vietnam who had lived in three different refugee camps in Malaysia and the Philippines. At the time, my teachers were instrumental in helping me navigate the daily routine in and outside of school. It was a terrifying time for me, but our Florida community welcomed us with jobs and a safe neighborhood in which to live. After a few years living in Florida and learning English, I began to volunteer in the community with the Asian American Cultural Council and the local Lutheran Social Services in the resettlement of refugees in the Refugees and Immigrants Department. I was most interested in staying connected with the Asian American community.

When I became a middle school teacher in 1992, I focused on honing my teaching craft and exploring different aspects of the profession itself. However, after teaching a few years as an Asian American teacher, I felt isolated, almost lonely, among my colleagues. During the 1990s, I did not see many Asian American educators at various district-wide events. Among 300 or so art educators in the district, I was the only Asian American art educator. There was literally no other Asian American art teacher that I could share cultural sentiments with relating to art teaching. Later in the 2000s, another Asian American art teacher joined me in my district

In my early years, the stress and the lack of interrelatedness with other adults was palpable every day. I had an interest in leadership engagement beyond teaching students – but not in the sense of wanting to be a school administrator – and found no opportunities for leadership within my daily routine. As I looked for ways to lead, I started with building authentic relationships with students and parents because I felt that this skill set was my professional strength. As I became more involved with the students and parents, I learned a few things: The more connected I felt with students and parents outside of the classroom, the more I learned about how the students learned and wanted to learn. The more I knew about the parents and their

lived experiences, the more I saw their disconnection from their children's schooling, including from curriculum, school site decisions, classroom discipline, district policies, and state standardized testing. This awareness was my "aha" moment of teacher leadership.

### **Development of Personal *Politics of Voice* for Teacher Leadership in the Community**

I realized that I wanted to lead in order to bring school change, but my interest lay in community change from outside the school. I also realized that there were hardly any opportunities within the school site or district for me to practice my own "politics of voice" (Giroux, 2005; McKay, 2010) or for me to exercise any personal or formal leadership aspirations. My observation was that my own minoritized intersectionality was too great for me to be seriously considered as a potential leader despite my advocacy for students and art program. Looking back, being overlooked was a blessing in disguise as an art educator. I was forced to look outwards. I had to re-connect with Asian American community advocates and leaders from years past. I shared student, parent, and my own challenges and successes with them and sought solutions to school-related issues. Sure enough, I found my allies.

My teacher leadership in the community was deliberately focused on the population and experiences that I related to as a former ESOL (English Speaker of Other Language) student and immigrant. I wanted to ensure that the leadership role itself was impactful. Finding Asian American educators as a support system within the schools and district was rare because there were so few as stated above, but finding an outspoken Asian American educator was even more difficult. I decided to be a unique voice in the conversation about schools in the community, articulating specific challenges and differences among Asian cultural groups given the geopolitics of their migrations.

As I worked with the Asian American community, I shared my observations about schools and the education struggles of Asian students, especially the Pacific Islanders and Southeast Asian Americans. My leadership role as an education advocate was wholeheartedly received. As one community leader, who was the first Asian American City Councilwoman and Council President, stated in support for my community work, "I have also admired her work connecting students to opportunities to serve their community and helping them be more civically engaged, as well as making sure her students have the resources and support they need to be successful in school and in life" (A. Brosche, personal communication, August 10, 2019). Another community member who is the current President of Asian American Federation of Florida and the Chairman of the Advisory Board of the Hindu Society of Northeast Florida shared, "Mai Keisling ... mentors ... and supports many needy Asian American ... students not only in [her] school" but other students from elsewhere or even after they graduated (R.Sharma, personal communication, August 11, 2019). Asian American leaders worked together to ensure that our presence was invited, our voices were heard, and our concerns about the perceived biases within the schools were noted.

### **(Teacher) Leadership Models Through Community Collaborative Efforts**

In the years since, I have learned to navigate community in order to connect the missing links between my community activism and advocacy for education and to finetune my advocacy for both contexts. In this process, I have grown personally and professionally as I worked with others to plan cultural and social community events. Through these collaborative efforts, I have

learned to mesh my voice, my knowledge, and my leadership skills with others. These collaborations have built a coalition of leaders from other ethnic groups to advocate for access to educational opportunities that only communities can provide. It was never an easy task. However, through practice and doing the gritty community volunteer work itself over the years, my platform as an education advocate started to take roots.

Once my reputation as a teacher leader in the community was established, I could easily translate that into my field of art and art history teaching. Because of my work in the community for education, especially for Asian American children and families, I was asked to serve multiple years on city boards and committees such as the Mayor's Asian American Advisory Board and Art in Public Places Committee and other organizations including Catholic Charities, Jacksonville's Inaugural Census Committee Chair of Community Census 2010, JCCI Race Relations Progress Report Committee, and UNF Center for Urban Education and Policy (CUEP) Advisory Board. The formal recognitions soon followed. I became more recognized as a teacher. My art and art history teaching were noted by the community and by my school and district. I began to receive teaching awards at the district and State levels. The recognitions started with community work as a champion or role model for education which transferred to being recognized as a good teacher in the classroom (E. Callao, personal communication, August 10, 2019). For me, the community leadership and teacher leadership currently seem to have collided and mingled in a way that I am able to seamlessly mesh the duality of these roles, as a teacher leader in the school and a "fearless" teacher leader in the community (W. Raiti, personal communication, August 10, 2019). I no longer feel isolated or helpless in my teaching profession but feel more like a partner with school, district, and community to facilitate change, earning a seat at the table with other agents of change for the betterment of our students and families.

### **The Application of Teacher Leadership to Build Student Leadership in the Community**

Another benefit of community teacher leadership is the opportunity to help students develop their own leadership skills. In order to do this intentionally, I needed to understand my own framework for leadership. Because I am a minoritized art teacher, I do not want to practice the traditional model of community leadership that powerful men, usually White business men with power and influence seem to take on (Gilbert, 1972; Hunter, 1980; Keisling, 2015; Miller, 1970; Nix, Dressel, & Bates, 1977). My students do not fit in this dominant culture description, so I found that using the pluralistic community leadership model (Easterling & Millesen, 2012; Keisling, 2015) made more sense. In this conception, diverse students are invited to join in critical dialogue to solve communal and education issues. This process persistently increases student participation in community work and develops their leadership skills and self-awareness as they volunteer their time and artistic talents. This approach builds trust among students, parents, and community members. For instance, my students participated in a planning meeting between students, community leaders, and an artist for a mural project focused on lessons learned from local Civil Rights history (Photo 1)

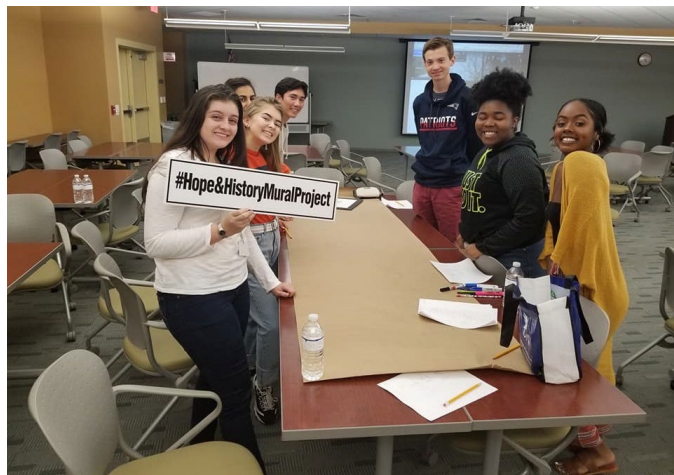


*Photo 1.* Hope and History Mural Project: Planning session for mural idea session inside the Eastside Brotherhood Building with the Muralist.

When the artist indicated that they wanted to paint only the faces of African American youth and simplistic symbols in the mural, my Hispanic and Asian American students raised their concerns that the mural project was meant to include the diversity of youth and their voices. They fearlessly disagreed with the artists' preconceived images that seemed to disregard their input. The meeting ended in frustration. Shortly thereafter, another meeting for student volunteers to return to plan new ideas for the mural was called on a Saturday (Photos 2 and 3). The students' new input about the visuals were considered. The community members were also invited to the meeting. Based on the students' input, the hired artist changed her design. Parents were very understanding with the organizers of the mural and trusted the process to allow their children to continue with the project.



*Photo 2.* Hope and History Mural Project. Keisling conducts the session for finalizing the mural idea at University of North Florida (UNF), College of Education and Human Services.



*Photo 3.* Hope and History Mural Project: Students Finalize the mural idea at UNF, College of Education and Human Services.

In effect, this type of inclusiveness based on trust created a collaborative leadership between the teachers and students, between the teachers and parents, and teachers-students-parents and the community members or organizational staff who partnered with us. This collaboration would serve to build student learning about themselves, their learning contribution to the community, and their role in the community. For me, I learned to constantly assess my leadership role in this complex interrelationship with everyone in order for students to continue to return to the community to serve and to learn. I also learned the importance of students' parents wanting to let their children to collaborate with me and the community actors and organizations. Finally, I learned about myself and ways to grow personally and professionally.

Over the years, I had to always keep a constant watch over the safety and protection of my students, which means that as a teacher leader, I must take seriously the role of an adult collaborator so that no one would take advantage and devalue the student involvement, inadvertently or advertently. However, as a leader who develops emerging student leaders in the community, I also learned to stand back and be a silent but ardent supporter and observer of my students as they perform community work and interact with their community project organizers. Student volunteer leaders also learned to behave as a professional from the start to finish of any of the community projects for which they had volunteered, including learning to communicate with the community organizations and staff, to punctually report at the designated sites, to work as a professional and stay until the committed time ended, and to follow the organizational expectations of the volunteers relating to the projects.

Teacher leadership in the community setting requires my constant presence with students, being a model of a professional educator where not only the community actors would establish rapport and trustworthiness towards my position as an educator and towards my spoken words, but also where my students could feel proud to be associated with me in public with other presumed or perceived community influencers and advocates. This is not a small task or a simple one. I must do my research before hand about the topics to be discussed to be prepared for the many informal small talk in classes in the days leading to the event, and also ensuring our discussions would not interfere with their class projects or assignments. I want to guide my students ahead of the actual work, providing them contextual knowledge or clarifying with them

any information relating to their upcoming meeting date with the organization's staff. I found that this framework of student leadership building re-enforces their intellectual confidence, social competence, and personal capital.

Unquestionably, the preparation for student leader volunteers to be in the community is just as important as the actual tasks of volunteering. I need to ensure my students safety and protection, provide them and their family with as much information about the tasks, expectations, location, logistics of the event, communicate by email and personal contact, and personally attend the events. When possible, I stay humble and stand back when students take action. As a teacher leader in this field, I must take the time to be thoughtful, humble, and deliberate in establishing a reliable student leadership framework (Whatley, Popa, & Kliever, 2012). Practicing and following these steps for community work as a community collaborator and a teacher leader in community provides students access to educational benefits that only community can provide.

### **The Impact of Teacher Leadership in Community Collaboration: One by One Student Voice Initiative**

One example of our community service is a collaboration with the Jacksonville Public Education Fund (JPEF). This non-profit think tank “works to inform and mobilize the community to advocate for universally high-quality public schools for all children”, and our collaborative project was the ONE by ONE: Student Voice Initiative (<https://www.jaxpef.org/news/new-initiative-aims-to-listen-to-and-activate-public-school-students>). Three community meetings were scheduled throughout the school district for students, parents, and community members to discuss student issues. I recruited my students to volunteer, representing the voices of students. I recruited three student leaders to attend three ONE by ONE Student Voice community planning meetings. They were to serve as Emcees (MCs) co-hosting with a local celebrity or notable personality, table facilitators to lead the table of students, parents, educators, and community members in the breakout conversations, and student participants who also serve as volunteers working alongside JPEF staff before, during, and after the event. As a teacher leader in this case, I aimed to recruit a team of diverse students. I learned about the responsibilities and activities of the student roles, and explained and clarified them for the students. This helped students feel more at ease and confident in the tasks that they volunteered for. I deliberately recruited a diverse pool of student volunteers ensuring a good representation of students of color, reflecting the district student population and empowering students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Some students who agreed to be MCs needed additional encouragement to feel confident working next to a local celebrity during the 3-hour event. In the end, we had five student co-hosts at three community meetings, leading the real conversations about what their own success is and what it looks like, their thoughts, and lived experiences with the audience. Students took on the challenge and became fearless in public speaking because they were speaking about their futures.

Students are rarely offered such leadership experiences, so we need to make sure they are embraced when they are offered. Trey Cesar, the former President of the Jacksonville Public Education Fund (JPEF), stated, “When it comes to public education, students are the real experts. Reaching the goal of high-quality public schools for all children can't happen without listening to the voice of students,” (<https://www.jaxpef.org/news/new-initiative-aims-to-listen-to-and->

activate-public-school-students). How often do we, educators and education advocates or even lawmakers, actually ask our students about their schooling, experiences, and possible solutions to educational challenges? Student voices can contribute to public understanding of the educational milieu. As one student co-host observed, “I was able to shed light on the intersectionality between academic success, home culture, and community activism” (R. Osario, personal communication, June 28, 2019). Other students shared about their successes as an art entrepreneur who embraced Black natural beauty and justice for Black students; as an athlete who values art and academic future goals; as immigrants from Ecuador and Philippines who struggled with discrimination and balancing school and family life; and as a Caucasian student who felt that success after high school could be achieved through vocational training. These are powerful conversations about students and school experiences in a public space that could not have been achieved in my classroom or in any educator’s classroom. The #MySuccessLooksLike presentation showcased the MC students’ success to the audience and what success looks like to them. Students led and facilitated similar dialog at the breakout tables and guided conversations around these questions:

- What do you see adults and the community organizations doing to help young people in regard to excelling education?
- What do you think you can do as a student to be an ambassador for your school and for the voices of other students? (Student Voice Campaign-Student Participant Expectations Handout, September 19, 2016)

After each of the ONE by ONE: Student Voice community meetings, all of my students including the MCs, facilitators, and participants felt empowered by a public space to voice their concerns and opinions, and by the recognition that student voices are essential in shaping the future. As indicated on JPEF’s website, some of the students’ thoughts from the event were highlighted. One of my students shared that the community and teachers should look beyond his Asian background and recognize his individual efforts and skills that have led to his success. He also discouraged stereotypes of Asian American students as having an innate ability for academics in comparison with other students (<https://www.jaxpef.org/news/students-identify-mental-health-inclusivity-and-community-partnerships-as-priorities-at-final-one-by-one-student-voice-event>). Whether or not people would act on this student’s perspective, his feelings from the event at least were made public for others to read and learn from. One of the key outcomes for students from the community meeting is to act on their beliefs about education and change the school culture around them.

Most of the volunteer students mentioned that the potential networking and the mentoring relationships developed from their involvement was empowering for them and that they learned how the community works to effect change and how they could impact education decisions. These students are leaders themselves who recognize that while JPEF is an organization that provides a public space for these platforms, students must be the ones that exercise the “power to generate and execute ideas” (R. Osario, personal communication, June 28, 2019). JPEF recognizes the potential shift in student-oriented education and wants to provide a public space that is welcoming for the stakeholders, most importantly students, to share their thoughts and plans for their future endeavors and develop leadership skills as well. As a teacher leader, I am humbled to see my students become activists for their own education rights. School success may not be about them passing an exam or meeting the state standards to advance to the next level.

However, their activism in the community provides the students a powerful platform in a public forum to contribute to the decision-making process with the community about their education, their lived experiences, and of their home cultures. Meanwhile, they serve as the voices to promote understanding of school culture, and to raise equity and equality awareness through their own lenses. In the process, students become informed citizens who will potentially be informed and engaged voters on educational justice issues, community issues and its operation.

The impact of the Student Voice series on student leadership beyond school grounds is immeasurable. But, what about the impact on teacher leadership? As I have navigated my community leadership role as a teacher leader, I have found that the community is receptive to the teacher's voice and involvement. Dr. Martelo, the Community Mobilization Director at JPEF, asserted, "Many [education] improvement projects fail to include diverse voices [from] different stakeholders... authentic engagement can only come from authentic listening. By engaging students and teachers into the conversations, ... we can ensure ... the best possible solutions," created by those who are in the trenches every day (personal communication, June 24, 2019).

Whether or not we – educators – have enough trust in the community in which we live is another matter. The more involved we are, the more community members – including parents and influencers – want us to inform them about our real challenges and successes. Institutions like JPEF understand that teachers are leaders at these community forums. I am empowered to be an active part of potential solutions because of the challenges of what I do every day to inform the community in a positive way. I can directly share with community members, my students, and their families the challenges and success stories, gaining empathy for my work to move towards real changes and enlist allies in the future community conversations about education. When I saw one of my student presenters excited about how her community audience wanted her contact information to purchase her artwork, praising and encouraging her to keep speaking about justice for Black youth through her art, and asking her to join the school district's Art Advisory Council, I felt accomplished as a professional in ways test scores could never do. This was a powerful moment for me as a teacher leader.

My teacher leadership in the community creates change which could never happen if I stayed within the confines of my classroom. Over the years, I have learned to exercise various community leadership models in non-traditional ways, moving beyond earlier forms of leadership described by Bass and Bass (2008), Hunter (1980), Miller (1970), and Nix and Seerley (1972) in which influence is rooted in economic, political, and social positions.

My lived experience as a former refugee from Vietnam draws me like a magnet towards a collaborative (Gialamas, Pelonis, & Medeiros, 2014; Raelin, 2006) and pluralistic perspective of leadership's decisions and actions when I work with my students and in my community (Easterling & Millesen, 2012; Keisling, 2015). This approach helps me to be a practitioner of diversity and inclusiveness (Kramer & Crespy, 2011; Stevenson, Pearce, & Porter, 1985) as a teacher leader.

In October of 2016, I was invited to join JPEF's Teacher Leader Roundtable series. Being a frequent voice about education in the community, I had earned a spot at the table. The purpose of the conversation was to provide teachers, who work directly with students every day, active roles in the policy decision-making process and/or to share best teaching practices with local and state policy makers.

Rachael Tutwiler Fortune, the current president of JPEF, shared that "teachers have expertise that can only be gained through the experience of developing relationships within their school community and providing instruction directly to students. We will miss the mark every



time, if teachers are not a part of the conversations about what's working and opportunities to improve our public schools" (personal communication, June 23, 2019).

Teachers can influence education policy by collaborative work in the community with our students and families by becoming their allies. Projects like the Teacher Leader Roundtable allows teachers "to celebrate, elevate, and empower [our district]'s best school educators, ... uplift[ing their] ... high-quality educators to help improve our schools, student performance and the teaching profession" (R.T. Fortune, personal communication, June 23, 2019). I felt valued and respected for my professionalism and teaching craft. I felt that, collectively, teachers could affect the education outcomes for our students and the community. I learned to grow my professional skills with my colleagues.

### **The Impact of Teacher Leadership in Community Collaboration for Hope and History Mural Project to Commemorate and Honor Local Civil Rights Event**

Another example of community involvement is my partnership with the Center for Urban Education and Policy (CUEP) at University of North Florida (UNF). This project focused on the painting of the Hope and History Mural Project on the downtown Eastside and was especially empowering to my student volunteers who expressed the value they placed on being involved in community work through art and becoming more interested in the community where we reside.

The Hope and History Mural Project (HHMP) was to commemorate a local civil rights event that happened on Saturday, August 27, 1960. On this date, protesters, including 34 Youth Black Council members from the local NAACP Chapter were engaged in peaceful sit-ins – calling attention to the segregated lunch counters at Woolworth's Morrison Cafeteria and elsewhere. A mob of 200 White citizens viciously attacked the protesters with baseball bats and ax handles. This racist event, known as Ax Handle Saturday, tainted local history. To bring this important history to the forefront, the UNF's Center for Urban Education and Policy created this mural project by inviting our students along with a few other students to work with selected local and national muralists. The project lasted about nine months from start to finish (Photos 4 and 5). Despite a significant time commitment, students (and parents) remained dedicated to this work.



*Photo 4.* Completion of the Hope and History Mural on the outside of Eastside Brotherhood building. Students pose with Artists, UNF CUEP staff, and Mr. R.L. Hurst, Sr., the Civil Rights icon being depicted as a youth at the sit-in lunch counter protest in 1960



*Photo 5.* Completion of the Hope and History Mural on the front entrance of Eastside Brotherhood building. Students pose with Artists, UNF CUEP staff, and Mr. R.L. Hurst, Sr., the Civil Rights icon. His teacher is being depicted as the lead advisor for the NAACP youth at the sit-in lunch counter protest in 1960

The students were taught about the event by Rodney L. Hurst Sr., a local civil rights icon, who was the 16-year-old leader of the Jacksonville Youth Black Council at the time of the attacks. Students worked closely with not only the artist and Mr. Hurst, but also with UNF – CUEP staff and the site’s Eastside community leaders, learning about the Black community and its struggles. As a teacher leader of 19 out of 30 students involved, I was very hands-on and active in the process, serving as their art teacher, advocate, protector, and community connector, ensuring that students gained art skills through apprenticeships, faced truth in history, and developed knowledge through community service. One student, Frances R., felt that the project enabled her to make connections with artists, CUEP staff, and art organizations in the community which “empowered [her] as an artist and student ... to refine [her] skills ...” and provided future opportunities to exhibit her artwork (personal communication, June 16, 2019). Similarly, C. Robinson shared that

the Hope and History Mural changed my life for the better... The project has even helped me grow artistically and helped me present my art skills to a larger audience, giving me more experience and connections for my future endeavors in the arts. But more importantly, I’ve been able to use my art for greater purposes and bring attention to issues in our world” (personal communication, June 26, 2019).

This student has since become actively involved with local art organizations like Color Me Kona, raising funds for art students in the Title 1 schools, the We Rise Fest and Movement, raising awareness for young musical and visual artists, and the Duval Gems, empowering women. She indicated that she had chosen to become more politically active to fight for positive change for not only herself but also for others less fortunate. Another student felt that the HHMP taught her about both “the history of the community ... and the making of history” and believed that she was an important part of the community “open[ing] ... doors of opportunity” for herself and other students (M. Pineiros, personal communication, June 16, 2019). This student was employed as the CUEP’s first Community Arts Curator after she entered UNF as a freshman in the College of Education and Human Services (COE&H). The works of Pineiros and another student were purchased for the permanent collection of the COE&H while F. Rodriguez and

another student's artwork were purchased by the current Director of CUEP and loaned to the Center. Without the connection and their involvement in the Hope and History Mural, these students' personal lives and artistic and educational endeavors would not be impacted with such power and force.

### **Final Words on Teacher Leadership Through Community Leadership**

One last observation to note is that being involved in community work with students and parents is never easy and smooth even though its impact is lasting and immeasurable. I had to be students' ardent advocate in the school community, sometimes addressing their mistreatment and various misunderstandings (with other students and other teachers). There will always be some mishaps as we interact with others in the community; however, if we educators are cognizant of the tasks involved and understand the students' roles and teacher leaders' responsibilities, we can impact students' learning and identity beyond the school walls. Meanwhile, as teacher leaders in the community, we develop professionally beyond what is required to deliver curriculum in the classroom. Our professional reflection extends beyond course and school context into personal agency and cultural identity. There is no boundary between the community and education. Each needs the other to ensure student success on their life journey.

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