Literacy Leadership in Support of Equity: Whatever it Takes

Allison Briceño, San José State University

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached nonviolence and led through the power of words during the civil rights movement. César Chávez and Dolores Huerta led the farmworkers movement using marches, speeches, and strikes, and they inspired playwright Luis Valdez to create El Teatro Campesino, which continues to use theater for social change. More recently, the Black Lives Matter leaders, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, employed social media brilliantly to create an international social movement (Maqbool, 2020). Different times and contexts called for different forms of leadership. Various forms of literacy were central to all of these historic movements; literacy and leadership are intimately intertwined. This article argues that the current moment in history opens the door to *subversive leadership* for literacy leaders, defined as anyone who teaches literacy.

While it may be an uncommon term, subversive leadership is very common in schools (Wang, 2016), where decisions made for all often do not meet the needs of all. In such schools, individual educators often employ subversive leadership to counteract policies and norms that are not in the best interest of their students. Wang (2016, p. 531) defines subversive leadership as, "the exercise of subversiveness as a process of influence that strategically challenges and disrupts status quo and resists, redresses or bypasses policies and practices that are counterproductive and unjust through ethical decision-making." In other words, subversive leaders use their influence to resist norms, policies, and pedagogies that do not advance social justice.

This article provides vocabulary and research to increase the intentionality and expand the influence of the leadership work teachers are already doing. It also aims to help equity-minded educators deepen their role as literacy leaders in the service of historically underserved children.

Dr. Marie Clay, the creator of Reading Recovery,® may be considered a subversive leader for her time. She closely observed young children's literacy processing and realized new forms of formative assessment and responsive teaching were needed. She wrote, "I live in a perpetual state of enquiry" (2001, p. 3). A lifelong learner, Clay questioned theory and practice, engaging with other researchers and rethinking her own work as she learned more (Clay, 2015). She worked tirelessly to improve literacy instruction for the students most underserved in the early grades. Her influence has provided access to literacy for innumerable students, and she has changed generations of educators' approaches to teaching (Clay, 2015).

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"Teachers as Dissidents"

As early literacy experts, teachers are leaders in their school communities. Educators lead through instruction, through interactions with colleagues, and through information shared with administrators, families, and school boards, to name just a few strategies. Yet, in the current day, teachers across the country feel stymied by the way literacy is being monetized and politicized at the expense of children (Hruby, 2023). Multilingual students, in particular, are at risk of being underserved by scripted curricula that may limit language development at the expense of foundational skills (Escamilla et al., 2022).

In fact, this is nothing new. Schools were never structured to meet the needs of culturally or linguistically diverse students, students of color, or neurodivergent students (Tyack, 1993). During the racial integration of schools after Brown vs. Board of Education, even schools that had been focused on scholarship shifted away from academics and toward obedience, which helped to maintain the social status quo and diminish the role of education in social mobility for people of color (hooks, 1994). Educational decisions, including the selection of literacy curricula, continue to be made based on politics instead of research, however literacy educators' subversive leadership can ameliorate harmful repercussions for students (Keisler et al., 2024).

While schools are not currently organized to meet the needs of all students, teachers and administrators often find subversive ways to do what's best for kids (Wang, 2018). In a Cult of Pedagogy podcast, author Melinda Anderson explains the dilemma teachers face:

> It's something that a lot of teachers struggle with because they know what works for a unique group of students, but they feel obliged to rigidly follow either the district's curriculum or buy into conventional wisdom. When a teacher goes against the norm, that's characterized as showing initiative or being innovative. Yet, in a system that really rewards conformity and obedience, this is really teachers as dissidents. This is teachers being subversive and being willing to take risks that best serve their students. (González, 2020).

While schools reward conformity, they also (usually) acknowledge teacher and student successes. The smart, measured risks educators take often result in success for students. In the above quote, Anderson acknowledges that these successes are often the result of teachers acting as dissidents. Research agrees: Subversive leadership is moral leadership that can be in conflict with compliance (Keisler et al., 2024; MacBeath, 2007; Wang, 2016).

Given schools' complexities and politics, subversive leadership is useful to combat the status quo and provide more equitable educational opportunities. In some contexts, Reading Recovery and Literacy Lessons® teachers disrupt the status quo in schools simply by centering the child instead of the curriculum. Subversive literacy leadership requires us to address the needs of all learners, especially students of color (Chisholm, 2023; Keisler et al., 2024). How can educators implement subversive practices in order to continue to best serve students?

Subversive Leadership Tactics

Wang (2018) shares three sets of tactics to implement subversive leadership: soft tactics, rational tactics, and bi/multilateral tactics. All three sets of tactics have been used effectively by equity-focused teachers (Chisholm, 2023; Keisler et al., 2024) and school administrators (Wang, 2016, 2018) who strive to meet the needs of all students. This article invites classroom teachers, school leaders, Literacy Lessons teachers, and Reading Recovery teachers and teacher leaders—individually or with colleagues—to apply some of the tactics and examples shared here. In fact, some of the examples are from the Reading Recovery community!

Soft tactics

Building relationships and developing networks of support are central to developing soft subversive leadership practices. Wang (2018, p. 405) explains, "Soft tactics seek to create a culture of collegiality and supportive relationship in which forgiveness is more likely to be granted." This might include sharing with colleagues the passion for your work and the reasoning behind it. For example, sharing your commitment to culturally appropriate literacy instruction for students of color, or a strategy used with a multilingual student, or sharing about your identity and motivation for equity work could all be examples of soft subversive leadership tactics (Keisler et al., 2024). In all three cases, relationships are being built with colleagues who (hopefully) share the goal of serving diverse children.

While it is critical to build relationships with colleagues, it is equally important to build relationships with students, their families, school administrators, district administrators, school board members, and even local politicians. Relationships can get us through difficult moments and challenging situations, and they can help us solve complex problems in new and creative ways (Wang, 2018). Even something as simple as taking an asset-based view of students, and sharing that view with colleagues, can be a soft subversive leadership skill in a context where students' deficits are highlighted more than their strengths. Building intentional, strategic collaborations

among classroom teachers, literacy specialists and/or English language development specialists could also be a soft subversive leadership tactic, especially when equity is the focus of a team's collaborative work.

Clay (2001) anticipated employing soft tactics with regard to Reading Recovery's evolution. She wrote, "It will be healthy to debate productively how best to introduce change into [Reading Recovery]" (p. 6). She advocated for professional, educated, research-based discussions about literacy theory and practice; these types of healthy debates build both relationships and learning among colleagues. In schools, soft tactics might include conversations between classroom teachers and reading specialists that identify approaches that work well for specific students, or sharing peer-reviewed articles or resources with colleagues.

Rational tactics

Rational tactics, or strategically considering how to expand our influence, is the second set of subversive leadership practices Wang (2018) identifies. He explains that rational tactics include "thinking before jumping, knowing the system, being diplomatic, opening themselves to diverse views, and planting seeds… subversive leaders need to assess situations, read the warning signs, and clearly think through rationale for their behaviors" (2018, p. 405). Rational tactics are intentional and strategic. They include being able to read the political landscape and navigate through it thoughtfully while continuing to best serve children (Wang, 2016, 2018).

Student data and peer-reviewed research are effective tools for rational subversive leadership tactics, as they can provide an explanation for why actions might not appear to be aligned with policy. In a study of equity-minded literacy leaders, the use of peer-reviewed, published research was found to be central to their work (Keisler et al., 2024). One teacher in the study used research on interventions and differentiation to adopt more equitable practices for minoritized students, and another provided professional learning opportunities for her colleagues to reconsider what counts as student data and how to use it to drive instruction (Keisler et al., 2024).

Reading Recovery and Literacy Lessons teachers receive professional development on using student data to shift their teaching. Clay (2019) identified running records as data *and* a form of professional development for teachers, as they learn to ask themselves questions, test hypotheses, and learn from a child's progress over time. Clay's direction to follow the child could be considered a rational tactic for teachers asked to teach a curriculum instead of the children in front of them. Other rational tactics might include prioritizing writing instruction over a curricular mandate on a particular day, or eliminating a part of the curriculum when data shows that all students have already mastered it (Wang, 2016).

Together, peer-reviewed, published research and student data are useful tools for rational subversive leadership (Keisler et al., 2024; Wang, 2018). However, educators need to expand the definition of data beyond formal assessments or benchmark tests. While those assessments might provide summative information, other data points that are helpful to drive instruction include students' writing samples, informal oral reading records, behavioral observations, reading interviews, fluency observations, bi/multilingual assessments, informal conversations with students and/or their families about their home literacy practices, and how students interact with other children in the classroom and on the playground. In other words, while data might look differently from what is expected, different forms of data are valid, valuable, and can provide an equity lens (Safir & Dugan, 2021). Rational subversive leadership tactics require educators to "know the system," and "understand the weaponry" so that they can do what is best for the children they have in front of them (Keisler et al., 2024, p. 12).

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Bi/Multilateral tactics

Like soft tactics, bi/multilateral tactics rely heavily on developing relationships in order to build coalitions and a positive culture. Wang (2018, p. 407), explains, "This relational dimension of subversive leadership is manifested in terms of communication, relationship building, and cultivation of a culture of collaboration. Being subversive involves using a combination of direct and indirect political tactics." Wang (2018) recommends being intentional about developing relationships at all different levels of a school system in order to open communication channels and create allies across the system. He notes that interpersonal skills are critical to better understand others' perspectives and be able to diffuse tense situations.

An example of bi/multilateral tactics might be creating relationships with school board members, district office staff, or the teachers' union. These relationships ensure that when issues or concerns arise, it's possible to have respectful conversations with people who are more likely to listen. Bi/multilateral subversive leadership tactics are—by definition—done in collaboration with others to build community around a topic. Keisler et al. (2024) share the example of teachers of color coming together to develop a curriculum that was culturally responsive to their students. The curriculum was approved by the district and used widely. Another teacher created a professional development that supported teachers in employing a culturally responsive lens in their teaching. With support from administrators, she was able to provide the PD widely, expanding her reach beyond her classroom and bringing others into the initiative to use a culturally responsive lens (Keisler et al., 2024).

Clay (2016) understood the need to build relationships and pushed for increased collaboration between classroom teachers and literacy specialists. She wrote, "Pragmatism precludes idealism" (2019, p. 3) and was always open to learning and adapting based on new research. She read widely, both within and outside of her discipline, which helped her to make connections and bridges to other ideas, concepts, and researchers. Reading Recovery and Literacy Lessons teachers might collaborate with the classroom teachers they work with to develop a professional development session or series. Or, they might explore similarities between their ongoing professional learning and that of their colleagues. In the current state of division and polarization, it is helpful to explore ways to bring colleagues together in the service of children.

> Educators are inherently leaders. It is critical for literacy educators to recognize our individual and collective power, and strategically and intentionally use our influence in the service of students.

Conclusion

During our current moment in history, ongoing debates about literacy teaching and learning can easily interfere with our ability to provide responsive instruction. Subversive leadership helps teachers and administrators navigate complex political situations for the benefit of our children. To that end, "Subversive leaders have to be savvy communicators" (Wang, 2018, p. 407), as they navigate local politics and build relationships with colleagues, administrators, school board, students, and families. Educators are inherently leaders; our behavior is a model for our colleagues, students, families, and communities. It is critical for literacy educators to recognize our individual and collective power, and strategically and intentionally use our influence in the service of students.

In our quest to provide access to literacy for *all* students, educators must not forget that schools are "shaped by local cultural contexts. These contexts change continually, driven by the history of how societies deliver education services to children" (Clay, 2001, p. 6). The political, historical, social, and economic contexts and histories of our communities must be taken into consideration as teachers plan their literacy leadership in service of equity. Constant consideration of students who have been historically underserved by schools is necessary. As Wang (2018, p. 405) states, "subversiveness is essentially creative use of power." A subversive leadership lens can help educators reconsider where their power lies and how to

most effectively use it to create more equitable and effective learning opportunities for all students.

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About the Author

Dr. Allison Briceño is an associate professor and chair of the Department of Teacher Education at San Jose State University.